

EMBODIED WRITING AND REFLECTIONS ON EMBODIMENT

Rosemarie Anderson
Boulder Creek, California

ABSTRACT: Embodied writing seeks to reveal the lived experience of the body by portraying in words the finely textured experience of the body and evoking sympathetic resonance in readers. Introduced into the research endeavor in an effort to describe human experience—especially transpersonal experiences—more closely to the way in which they are truly lived, embodied writing is itself an act of embodiment, entwining in words our senses with the senses of the world. This article describes the collaborative efforts of faculty and students over a 5-year period to develop embodied writing as an alternative or adjunct to conventional report writing often found wanting in the body's full experience. Seven distinctive features of embodied writing are described and illustrated with examples. Ongoing studies using embodied writing as a means of collecting data, motivating participants, and reporting findings are explored. The author concludes with reflections on the nature of embodiment—lessons learned in developing embodied writing.

My most successful attempts at research are rarely in conventional settings. Instead I am alone and sweetly apart from habits of mind and circumstance. Taken by the current of meandering days and chance happenings, my body finds a slower easy pace. Sometimes skipping, sometimes with a promenading air, I walk lightly—each step like touching a piano key with a note to play, a sense to sound. In nimble gestures the earth and I seem as one dance: landscape sashaying toward me step upon step, the hills and valleys beckoning and nodding to me even as I walk toward them. I slip into a contented rhythm that even my thoughts and emotions cannot ignore. They too bow to its pace and listen more as though beholding one another. (Anderson, 1998a, p. 3)

Embodied writing brings the finely textured experience of the body to the art of writing. Relaying human experience *from the inside out* and entwining in words our senses with the senses of the world, embodied writing affirms human life as embedded in the sensual world in which we live our lives. As a style of writing, embodied writing is itself an act of embodiment. Nature feels close and dear. Writers attune to the movements of water, earth, air, and fire, which coax our bodily senses to explore. When embodied writing is attuned to the physical senses, it becomes not only a skill appropriate to research, but a path of transformation that nourishes an enlivened sense of presence in and of the world.

Requests for reprints should be sent to: Rosemarie Anderson, 744 San Antonio Rd., Palo Alto, CA 94303 (e-mail: RosemarieAnderson@compuserve.com).

I wish to thank the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology for its ongoing support of transpersonal research and the development of new research methods; William Braud, Herman Coenen, Robert Frager, Sonja Margulies, Tina Stromsted, and Jenny Wade for their encouragement of embodied writing by using the style in some of their own writings; William Braud, Jay Dufrechou, and Bryan Rich for providing feedback on an earlier draft of this article; and Brian Heery, Katherine McIver, Bryan Rich, and Laura Riordan, who have allowed me to quote from their unpublished writings. I especially wish to thank and acknowledge the many doctoral students who collaborated in the development of embodied writing, especially long-term seminar participants Holly Brannon, Jay Dufrechou, Brian Heery, Rosie Kuhn, Kelly Sue Lynch, Katherine McIver, Robert Mitchell, Cortney Phelon, Bryan Rich, Laura Riordan, and Kari St. John.

Copyright © 2001 Transpersonal Institute

Seeking to relay the living experience of the human body, embodied writing portrays experience from the point of view of the lived body, *Leib* rather than *Körper* in Edmund Husserl's (1952/1989) sense. The researcher collects, analyzes, and reports findings, fully intending to invite readers to encounter the narrative accounts for themselves and from within their own bodies through a form of sympathetic resonance. Ultimately, as a research tool, the efficacy of embodied writing depends on its capacity to engender a quality of resonance between the written text and the senses of the readers that allows readers to more fully experience the phenomena described. The readers' perceptual, visceral, sensorimotor, kinesthetic, and imaginal senses are invited to come alive to the words and images as though the experience were their own, akin to the way we might read fine poetry or fiction. Embodied writing tries to let the body speak.

I often feel that researchers, even transpersonal researchers, report experiences—even explicitly full-bodied experiences such as orgasm—as though they had never known the experience themselves. Too much scientific report writing is tiresome and flat. Typically, scientific writing takes a distanced, observing stance conventional for scientific reports. I sit down for a good read on a topic that interests me and instead I find myself yawning uncontrollably and yearning for a nap. Even the results sections of fine qualitative studies are often long and exacting, but not exact from the full experiential perspective of the body. If they were exact in the sense of being fully present and alive, I would find myself responsive and engaged, not distanced and bored. But too often I feel disembodied as though the report has little to do with me or things precious in my life.

Continuing to write in a Cartesian style no longer seems acceptable, especially in the fields of transpersonal psychology, consciousness studies, health psychology, and positive psychology. Disembodied writing just perpetuates the object-subject bifurcation between the world of our bodies and the world we inhabit. In the 19th and 20th centuries, the hegemony of behaviorism in psychology widened the divide. The legacy of Western philosophy and psychology notwithstanding, we are viscerally and perceptually part and parcel of the world in which we live, attuned to its vicissitudes and nuances, and informed moment to moment and over the seasons of our lives by its sensuous enactments (Levin, 1999). From the perspective of embodied writing, scientific discourse need not be dull and drear, neutered of its intrinsic relationship to the sensuous world. The objectivistic penchants of conventional science separate researchers from the phenomena they hope to impart—and in turn separate the readership from the phenomena as well. In stark contrast with the scientism and objectivism of the conventional research presentation of findings, embodied writing offers a fresh and yet rigorous approach to scientific discourse.

Akin to the use of acoustic resonance in music and physics, embodied writing employs the principle of sympathetic resonance introduced earlier as a form of validity in the context of intuitive inquiry (Anderson, 1998a, 2000). For example, if I bow a string on a violin, the same string on another violin across the room will begin to resonate as well. Resonance is immediate and direct. In a like manner, as I read accounts of the experiences of others—experiences both similar and dissimilar

to my own—I often find myself in resonance or consonant to some of the narrative. It strikes a chord with me. I find myself in tune with the words of others. A rudimentary pattern of consensual validity starts to form. Another's depictions are similar enough to mine to help me feel through to the experience of another. It becomes a part of me. My understanding deepens and expands. On the other hand, some accounts feel neutral or dissonant, forming a rudimentary pattern of discriminative validity. Noting consonance, neutrality, or dissonance for individuals from different cultures and subgroups allows patterns of consensual and discriminative validity to emerge (Anderson, 1998b, 2000).¹

Embodied writing tries to make the experience “present” in the writer while writing and in the reader while reading. For this reason, I’m not so much going to tell you about embodied writing, but I will do it as I go along. Rather than pointing with words as though from a distance, I will write from this full-bodied perspective as best I can, even in the didactic sections to follow. I will “cut loose” especially in the last section, in which I reflect on what I’ve learned about embodying the present through embodied writing.

DEVELOPMENT OF EMBODIED WRITING

As a unique style of writing, embodied writing was developed in a research seminar entitled “Spirituality,” under my leadership, at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology. The seminar met weekly each quarter for 4 academic years between 1996 and 2001. I structured the seminar in an open-ended manner, allowing for exploration and spontaneity, and the seminar became a truly collaborative venture for which I am very grateful. Over this period, approximately 40 doctoral students participated in the seminar. While new students and their fresh perspectives showed up in the seminar every quarter, five students continued for 2 years and several more for a year or more, allowing for continuity in our collaborative development of embodied writing. Students were already investigating a wide range of body-related topics in their own dissertation work, including chronic pain and transcendence (Brannon, 1999), grief in response to nature (Dufrechou, 2001), sailing as a transformative experience (Kuhn, 2001), poetry and embodiment in the life of Emily Dickinson (Lynch, 2000), creativity and sculpting with clay (McIver, 2001), and the healing presence of a psychotherapist (Phelon, 2001).

What became very clear during the first year of the seminar was the need or desire on our part to talk about the body in a new way. Most of what we read, even when reading reports on bodily experiences, felt disembodied and cerebral to most of us. We sensed that researchers knew more about the full-bodied nature of their topics but weren’t sharing them on paper, especially in professionally refereed journal articles. I knew from my own experience that I often learned more about research findings and the true-to-life story of how innovative findings came to be when researchers spoke informally over a good meal. Breaking loose from conventional strictures simply is not easy, but conviviality abets the truth. Though we can’t take every researcher to dinner, by modeling embodied writing well we can provide an alternative way of writing that provides sanction to experiential reporting of findings.

As we struggled through trial and error to write about significant personal and typically transformative experiences from the body's point of view, many paradoxes of embodiment were revealed to us. From the start, and regardless of our expertise in other writing styles, we noticed how much more difficult embodied writing was than other forms of writing, including personal journal and letter writing. The busyness of modern life doesn't lend itself to slowing down and turning to the nuanced senses of the body as they entwine with the senses of the surrounding world. Doing so—deliberately slowing down and heeding the nuances—requires steady and mindful attention to detail. I first learned steadied concentration in the kitchen with my mother, who was a bit of tyrant when it came to dinner preparation. Years later, I learned to count bar presses in the "rat lab" without a miss. Still later, I learned to meditate. Others in the seminar attributed their skills of concentration to a wide variety of focused activities: fly-fishing, sports, Aikido, Zen and Vipassana meditation, espionage, auto mechanics, finish carpentry, pilot training, piano tuning, cooking, and gardening, to name a few. And as if observing the body's subtle senses were not difficult enough, finding the words to artfully describe them was even more difficult.

What surprised me the most over time (though it seems obvious now) was the capacity of embodied writing to call forth the writer's particular qualities, even a kind of essentiality of expression. Writers gain voice, particular voice. Far from making everyone sound alike by employing a particular style of writing, embodied writing seems to bring forth the particular or unique qualities of the writer. There may be "as many styles as there are embodied authors," as David Michael Levin put it in a letter to me (May 22, 1998). In the examples which follow in a later section, I invite readers to look closely at how distinct each writer's use of embodied writing is from that of others. While the distinctive features of embodied writing are evident in all of the selected examples, each writer sounds unlike the others. Indeed, in slowing down and looking for resonance within the body of the writer in the act of writing, embodied writing reveals the tangibly unique—and sometimes ineffable—qualities of the writer.

Finding the right words takes time and gets easier with practice. Writing a single paragraph of profound, personal experiences can take hours or days. It helps to get feedback. During the course of the seminar, we developed a style of giving feedback to each others' weekly writings but restricted feedback to "what resonated" to each of us individually as we read or listened to each others' writings. Content reflections, however engaging, were considered superfluous in assisting a writer to develop his or her unique style of embodied writing. Learning what qualities in the writing invited resonance mattered most, not a brilliant idea or turn of phrase. Out of this process, embodied writing developed slowly, innovation by innovation, insight by insight.

Laura Riordan (personal communication, June 10, 2001) describes her experience of embodied writing:

I learned that writing can be fun when it does not come [just] from the head or the heart.
I have tried many other styles of writing, but none has given me as much gratification as

embodied writing. For me this practice is about journeying into my body and expressing in words what my body is sensing, not what it feels like, but what it is actually experiencing. As if I am in this “suit” of my body, looking out through the eye holes, while at the same time having all the sensations of the skin, other organs and systems fully present and alive.

SEVEN DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF EMBODIED WRITING

Over a 3-year period of weekly writing and feedback, seven distinctive features consistently produced resonance in readers. All seven features are illustrated in the example of embodied writing that begins this article and the examples that follow in the next section. Some readers may wish to read the examples before reading the distinctive features below.

1. Embodied writing contains true-to-life, vivid depictions intended to invite sympathetic resonance in the readers or audience. The most distinctive feature of embodied writing is its intent to invite sympathetic resonance in others. The finely nuanced quality of the writing invites readers or listeners to palpably feel the writer’s experience or something much akin to it. In a sense, the experience itself becomes palpably present and therefore present to others. However successful in each instance, embodied writing seeks to communicate through resonance.

In retaining the whole and unbroken nature of the experience without any reductive or reflective analysis, embodied writing is distinguished from phenomenological (e.g., Colaizzi, 1973; Giorgi, 1985; Valle, 1998; van Kaam, 1966; von Eckartsberg, 1986) and hermeneutical phenomenological (e.g., Van Manen, 1990) descriptions of experience. In particular, embodied writing does not assume that there is any essential nature of experience to be found or reported, in the sense that Van Manen (1990) uses the term *essential nature*, referring back to Martin Heidegger (1962). There may be an essential nature to experience, but embodied writing does not assume so. No objective, external world is posited in the positivistic sense. What can be known is interpretive, ever changing, and creative. It can never be “nailed down” in an objectivistic sense. What is “true” today interpretively is not necessarily so tomorrow. The experience of one person is sufficient to itself, worthy of itself, particularly if he or she says it is so. It is real or valid enough for him or her. Over time, if an embodied account wins an audience, it becomes apparent that something about the telling is important to others, too. The writing “rings a bell” for the reader. Sympathetic resonance occurs, however fleeting.

2. Embodied writing includes internal and external data as essential to relaying the experience. Embodied writing includes both internal (imaginal, perceptual, kinesthetic, and visceral data usually known only by the experiencer) and external (sometimes observable to others, but not always, such as sensorimotor reactions and context) sources of information. Rather than writing from the perspective of a positivistic science (specifically, of behaviorism in psychology), embodied writing values both internal and external sources without privileging one over the other or presuming external verifiability. Embodied writing does assume, however, that an experience important enough to write about is likely, though not necessarily in all cases, to contain rich internal and external information. Indeed, an experience does

not have to be extraordinary or transcendent in order to be significant to psychological or spiritual development.

3. Embodied writing is written specifically from the inside out. Embodied writing drops the external-witness perspective customary in conventional, “objective” science. The body speaks for itself through the vehicle of words. Like any medium of expression, words often elude the immediate fullness of experience. Yet, to the extent possible, embodied writing positions the writerly voice inside the body as it lives, letting the body’s perceptual matrix guide the words, impulse by impulse, sensation by sensation. In the examples of embodied writing given in this article, please note that positioning the writerly voice inside the body does not support indulgent, mental chatter. When done well, embodied writing is concrete and specific.

4. Embodied writing is richly concrete and specific, descriptive of all sensory modalities, and often slowed down to capture nuance. Embodied writing invites a lively sense of living here and now by attending rigorously to minor external and internal details as they arise in experience, in a manner similar to phenomenological descriptions (e.g., Colaizzi, 1973; Giorgi, 1985; van Kaam, 1966; von Eckartsberg, 1986; Valle, 1998). Accounts often employ multisensorial and synesthetic descriptions, that is, descriptions that include more than one of the five conventional senses. Experience is often slowed down in the temporal sense in order to re-live and remember to the extent possible, and it is described carefully. In slowing down, we often notice how much is actually taking place.

5. Embodied writing is attuned to the living body (*Leib* rather than *Körper* in Husserl’s [1952/1989] sense). As the examples to follow amply illustrate, although embodied writing describes the body’s physical senses in detail, accounts are not limited to the physical senses. Living in a body is to live fully attuned to the sensual matrix of the world. We are situated in an animate world within and without. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1968) points out, the body lives inhabiting the world and the world inhabiting the body. Embodiment is not commensurate with our physical senses. It is not the lips alone that touch the ram’s horn when the *shofar* is blown at Rosh Hashanah (see excerpt from Bryan Rich below), but the world of sensual experience summoned by the blowing. It is not sex alone that makes for sensuality, but the touching and intimacy that sex implies. No love letter—or hate letter for that matter—is solely bits and bites of sweetness and fears, but a host of sensual enactments past and present.

6. Embodied writing includes narratives embedded in experience, often first-person narratives. Embodied writing is based on personal experience even if a writer or researcher is summarizing the collective experience of many. If the writer is speaking of his or her own experience, the first person is used for referential accuracy.

7. In embodied writing, poetic images, literary style, and cadence serve embodied depictions and not the other way around. Embodied writing values vivid accounts of lived experience over literary artfulness. A good phrase or artful expression is extraneous to a sentence unless it supports an embodied description. Notice too in the examples that follow that acoustical cadence, such as *andante* (walking) or *alle-*

gro (lively), mirror the sensory or emotional tone of the experience described and lend meaning. Good editing (sometimes known as “killing your darlings”) is essential to embodied writing.

The features of embodied writing are inherently related and flow readily one to another. Writers and researchers are invited to choose features appropriate to their research topics and intended audience, as well as features that serve their abilities as writers. An individual writer or researcher might employ or emphasize some or most of these features to relay a particular topic, but not necessarily all of them all the time. The inclusion of all the features is an ideal standard and not necessarily appropriate to every use of embodied writing.

EXAMPLES OF EMBODIED WRITING

From several dozen possible examples written for the seminar, I have chosen five examples (usually excerpts from longer pieces of writing) that are illustrative of all or many of the distinctive features of embodied writing, understandable without much contextual commentary on my part, and short enough to quote in a journal article. In choosing from among writings prepared for the seminar, I do not intend to suggest that embodied writing is not found elsewhere. During the course of the seminar, we read extensively in both scientific and popular literature, looking to others to help us write from an embodied perspective. We did find a few examples of embodied writing in qualitative research, especially studies conducted from a heuristic perspective (Moustakas, 1990). More often, though, we found examples of embodied writing in popular literature on the body (e.g., Friedman & Moon, 1997) or nature (e.g., Abram, 1996), all of which tended to be personal if not autobiographical in nature. These books are readily available. Certainly, all avid readers of poetry, especially nature poetry, will have their own favorite examples of embodied writing.

The first example of embodied writing, by Laura Riordan (2001), describes an experience likely to be familiar to those of us who have practiced hatha yoga or other demanding physical activities. Notice Laura’s direct style and discriminating attention to detail in relaying her experience of “relaxing” into the *baddha konasana* (butterfly posture) in a morning practice session of yoga with a master teacher.

As [my teacher crosses the room and] nears me I prepare for the mental and physical torture that is imminent. My mat becomes a giant cushion beneath me, supporting me. . . . The muscles surrounding my pelvis and hips relax as I sink into my mat creating a familiar groove. [I feel a] melting of pain, a sense of satisfaction . . . completion in my posture and then he is standing over me. In a deliberate and abrupt movement, my teacher places his right foot upon my right thigh. He leans over placing his right hand on the ground in front of me and shifts his weight to his right side. He steadies, my body stiffens. I brace against his weight. He places his left leg onto my left thigh and rocks a bit before settling his weight into his hands pressing into my upper back. “Why are you fighting me?” my teacher asks in a soft voice. My body is rigid beneath him. . . . The fibers in my legs begin to twitch. . . . My skin has become so sensitive that I feel a small wrinkle in my mat that I did not feel before . . . ! As I hold my feet open, soles together, the small sticky dimples in my mat rub my little finger raw. . . . Then comes the final adjustment. Focus slips a bit as my head is pressed down by my teacher’s right hand to touch my feet. . . . Breathing

pauses with the in-breath, my body is puffed full of air and defending his weight. . . . I know that he will not move until I take in a full, relaxed breath of air. I begin to sweat as I fight against his weight. Just breathe. Do not fear. I release and my teacher retreats gently allowing my head to raise and I settle back onto my sitting bones. (pp. 1-2)

The following example relays Katherine McIver's (1998) experience of being awakened from a conditioned lifestyle by a peak experience, which later prompted her dissertation work on sculpting with clay as an embodied practice of integration (McIver, 2001). Notice her attention to the physicality of her transformative experience and how her powerful writing style supports the force of the experience.

When I was 45 years old I had a peak experience that blew me wide open. It was a sexual experience. Love found its way into my body. . . . The sexual vibrations surged deep into my body, cracking the hard shell that had enveloped me, penetrating into every corner, touching each organ, rattling every cell. In those brief elegant moments I became a bouquet of energy, bursting forth with no boundaries. At the same time I saw light, like a shimmering golden ball expanding before my eyes, spreading warmth throughout my body as it moved forward and surrounded me. I knew then, in some profound way, the interconnection of all things and felt unconditional love and the presence of God. I experienced the unity of all life. I was the same as every animal, insect, fish, plant that inhabited the earth. Time stopped. I was in the past, present, and future all at once, more than just me. I was my mother, my grandmother, my great grandmother, all the women of my past, aching to be set free. I was my daughters and their daughters, waiting for the gift of embodied life. My body ceased its silence [as a] formidable and unknown force, rising from the depths of my being, broke into awareness and would no longer be still. (p. 3)

The following example from Brian Heery (2001) describes a punch in the head from a master teacher in the context of Aikido. Notice how artfully Brian slows down the narrative, inviting us to experience “love in a punch to the head.”

Where's the love in a punch to the head?

My bare feet find comfort in the texture and character of the tatami mat beneath. Thoughts and memories are alive in that intimate relationship of flesh and earth. My breath deepens and I feel the earth's attraction for the limbs of my body more deeply as the tension in my muscles releases. My feet flatten out and the capillaries in my lower extremities are gorged with blood as my whole being focuses on attacking my Aikido teacher. Blood flows powerfully from my heart and flesh and bones work together in harmony producing a shifting landscape, as the distance to my teacher diminishes. My hand raises to grasp his arm, suddenly my cheek is glued to the heel of his hand. All that exists is his bones melding into the contour of my cheekbone with tremendous force. Miraculously in the same moment blending with the soft cartilage in my nose. The structure of my body and his body are as one. A resonance permeates down through my organs, cells and atoms. An emptiness opens up and all form dies, even time fails to permeate this infinite universe. Intimacy as never before experienced, atoms older than the sun, unable to distinguish their source, all that exists is one. Time and structure break back into my experience as I feel the force of his blow to my skull whip down my spine and out my tail bone, my legs leave the floor and suddenly the floor is racing towards me at an incredible speed. My flesh is filled with vitality as I take a hard side break fall on the mat as the force of impact is easily dissipated into the ground by these vibrant cells. The resulting vibrations course through my body as my bones and flesh realign. Grateful for the insight gained from this

experience I rise and once again attack my Aikido teacher. (p. 1)

The following example relays Jay Dufrechou's (2001) experience of truly "hearing" the rain for the first time, a familiar experience turned deliciously unfamiliar. Notice how Jay employs a personal and affective tone, a brisk narrative style, and an intimate choice of words and images to support the sensuous qualities of hearing the rain.

On this particular morning, I lay in bed for several minutes, enjoying the warmth beneath the covers, the nearness of my wife, and the sound of water falling against the roof, against the panes of the windows, through the trees outside and down to the ground. . . . Eventually, I . . . ventured out of the warmth of the bed and made my way to my office, a converted garage, where I meditate. . . . As is usually the case when I begin to meditate, my mind goes quickly into gear and a familiar chatter takes hold of my attention: What did I need to do today? Did I have any appointments? I must remember to bring envelopes and that research book to school. We better go over my son's vocabulary word with him again before the carpool comes. What would I make for dinner tonight? We could have ravioli. . . and on and on.

But this morning when I returned attention to my breath, I noticed that I actually *heard* the rain. Simultaneously, I realized that when the mental chatter had been running, I had *not* been hearing the rain. As I stayed with my breath, and continued *hearing* the rain, I began to notice details about the rain that had previously escaped me. The rain on the roof of the garage-turned-to-office actually sounded quite different from the rain falling against the bedroom and trees outside. This sound was louder, for one thing, and it seemed nearer, more physical, as if each drop individually, and also collectively, was making an impression on my nervous system. I could visualize—within my body visualize, even *experience*—thousands of raindrops contacting wood shingles above me, and at that point, as I noticed this, I began to weep. The weeping felt like an easing open, a relaxing, an accessing: and it felt good, as though something stored within my body was finally allowed release. (p. 75)

In the following example, Bryan Rich (2000) writes of his experience of blowing the *shofar*, the traditional carved ram's horn, to herald the new year at Rosh Hashanah. Notice Bryan's attention to detail and nuance as kinesthetic, perceptual, and visceral senses change over time; how he appears to relive the experience as he writes and in so doing reaches out to us in words without reducing the significance of the experience to bits and bites of sensations. Since few readers are likely to have had the experience of blowing the shofar, Bryan's portrayal represents a robust test of embodied writing to evoke sympathetic resonance.

[M]y eyes widen with anticipation. I've done this so many times, and still that quiet fear whispers its electricity. The hairs on my forearm become alert and my chest tingles, as they do every time I approach this threshold. I feel my blood move a little faster. My ears prick up and hearing becomes razor keen even as it's suddenly silent inside my head. A small prayer, the primeval curve of the ram's horn shapes my hand and I touch the small opening to my lips—the familiar feeling, there's no way I can fit it quite right except that it fits perfectly, hard against soft, like the first joint of my index finger fits together, or like a kiss.

I have to inhale from deep, and as I inhale time slows down through an endless moment

until there is nothing left but now. I begin to blow slowly, and slowly, without forcing, pressure swells from my belly up through my chest. I can feel my heart claiming more space in my chest. . . . My whole body is expanding. It soars, riding the wave of the sound—but not off the ground. . . . Now [the wave] flows inward at the same time, finding and caressing the familiar opening in the inner depths of my belly center. . . . My heart is losing its boundaries as it spreads further in all directions. The spring overflows from the hidden place inside the precisely innermost point in the center of my body and carries me into it. This is the open secret. It's the gently overwhelming place too small to be found by my knowing mind, caressed in my body center and bigger than the sky. (pp. 1-2)

USING EMBODIED WRITING IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Embodied writing seeks to bring a fuller expression of human experience to scientific discourse. At the very least, embodied writing allows researchers to explore a topic more completely—even if only for themselves. The mores governing the conventions of scientific reporting are shifting, albeit slowly. Full disclosure does not always aid communication in life, and it might not be appropriate (yet) to write in an embodied style in scholarly disciplines that warrant external observation. But a researcher using embodied writing (and, no doubt, other styles of reflection) knows more fully what he or she is studying. Praise be! I've conducted my own research and supervised dozens of dissertation and thesis students in the past 30 years, and often at the end of a study I feel that the topic was barely touched. Research sometimes seems shallow in regard to significance, as though we researchers are floating in a rubber raft and never getting wet. The kinesthetic and visceral dimensions of the body's experience are rarely mentioned. Inquiring deeply into the nature of phenomena is at the heart of what we do as transpersonal psychologists. Embodied writing was created in the context of studying transpersonal phenomena, to help bring human experience, as it is fully lived, into the purview of scientific research.

The application of embodied writing to the research process has just begun. Cortney Phelon's (2001) investigation of the healing presence of a psychotherapist combines both traditional report-writing descriptions and embodied writing to report her findings. The embodied sections help imbue her dissertation with a ring of authenticity congruent with her topic. Cortney (personal communication, September 14, 2001) writes of her process:

When I wrote in an embodied way I willfully entered a state [in which] I observed the stream of my thought and allowed the richly detailed terrain of experience to flourish simultaneously. I found that witnessing consciousness created a spacious container within me, which both allowed and protected the parallel processes of experience and thought. In this open space I could sift through words until one had the ring of accuracy. My body relaxed when there was a match between words and experience. Those moments of embodied writing were my favorite. There are a number of passages, and I can still feel it when I come across them, that were written from an embodied place. My body seems to know when it has been included in the writing process. It comes alive and into engagement, like flower petals tilting toward the sun.

Four studies, by Brian Heery (2000) on transformation in Aikido, Kelly Sue Lynch (2000) on the creative process of Emily Dickinson, Jay Dufrechou (2001) on grief

in response to nature, and Laura Riordan (2000) on integrating transformative experiences in the wilderness, employ embodied writing as a means by which to collect data, motivate participants, and interpret and report findings.

Kelly Sue Lynch (2000) employs an embodied discourse of writing and reflection to garner insights into Emily Dickinson's life and creative process. She selects letters and poems by Dickinson and allows her own creative process to experience the times and places in which Dickinson lived.

In a study of the integration of peak experiences in the wilderness into everyday life, Laura Riordan (2000) blends embodied descriptions of her own experiences in the wilderness into a conventional review of the literature. She chose to give the literature review an embodied dimension because (a) her own experience provided a concrete example; (b) her embodied experience of wilderness adventure transformation was what brought her to investigate the process of integration, and it therefore presents the experience most fully; and (c) embodied descriptions allow readers to relate to the meaning of the story on a deeper level by resonating to the kinesthetic or sensory level of experience. Laura asks research participants to tell their stories of wilderness adventure and their successful integration of these experiences into their daily lives using an embodied writing style.

In an in-depth study of the transformative process potential in the practice of Aikido, Brian Heery (2000) interviews three master Aikido teachers using his own embodied descriptions to help focus and engage the interviewees.

Embodied writing allows me to discover what it means to write as a body of flesh and bone and how this process can strip away some of the barriers that keep us from knowing each others' experiences. For example, in interviewing one of the Aikido masters, I found sharing some of my own writing to be an invaluable aid in encouraging my interviewee to recognize and begin to articulate her own experiences of awe in the practice of Aikido. Just asking her to describe her experience was insufficient. There seemed to be some resistance to using the word awe. But once I read a portion of my own embodied writing articulating an instance of experiencing awe in the practice of Aikido, she resonated powerfully and talked for thirty minutes clearly outlining her own experiences of awe and the similarities and unique characteristics of her own experiences. (Brian Heery, personal communication, July 7, 2001)

Jay Dufrechou (2001) is currently investigating the experience of grief in response to nature. Beginning with his own experience of "hearing the rain" for the first time, he solicited written descriptions or stories of the experiences of others. Primarily through the Internet, Jay describes embodied writing to prospective participants and asks for stories that invite readers to feel the experience as though it were occurring to them. He describes embodied writing as "rich in sensory detail," as though the writer were "telling the story of the body and emotions as well as the mind [and intending] to evoke resonance in a reader" (p. 100).

Jay receives descriptions and then engages in dialogue with the writers online to help them develop their embodied descriptions, usually inviting them to be more

specific about the body-level aspects of their experience. His goal is not just to understand the experience in an analytic sense, but also to convey an intuitive, body-level sensation of the experience under study. He writes (Jay Dufrechou, personal communication, July 11, 2001):

The discipline of embodied writing tends to put the researcher in touch with the creativity of the body.... seem[ingly] to magnify the contents or results of research. It is not simply that embodied writing allows a more effective communication of results that would have existed anyway. Rather, the use of this form of research has everything to do with what is learned and understood. As in intuitive inquiry (Anderson, 1998a, 2000) the form of the research aligns with the product of research. Particularly regarding transpersonal topics, the research and the experience tend to converge.

Much is yet to be explored and understood about the value of using embodied writing in the context of research. Given that embodied writing was created to balance the prevailing conventions of research that are used for external observation, the advantages of embodied writing to research are at the outset more obvious than the potential disadvantages. However, having been myself trained as a behaviorist and greatly valuing what I learned about the rigor required in making observations well, I would caution researchers—and perhaps especially transpersonal researchers—not to throw out the baby with the bathwater. What matters most is that we describe and relay human experience well and fully. Do whatever it takes, whether you employ embodied writing, other procedures and reporting styles, or the techniques taught in psychological behaviorism. Research methods and techniques must always be subservient to what is studied. Combine and refine procedures. Develop new applications. And write to me and let me know what you learn.

REFLECTIONS ON EMBODIMENT

My interests in embodiment and in developing embodied writing arise from my own life experience. As a young woman, I was a gymnast and learned to rely on sports rather than academics for strength, confidence, and awareness of others and my surroundings. Despite extensive graduate training in behavioral psychology in my 20s and theology in my 30s, I found sanctuary in my kinesthetically based understandings to ground and sort through everything I read or heard. I found it difficult, if not impossible, to agree with anything that I didn't know from my own experience, regardless of an authority's eminence or expertise. My spontaneous physical movements and visceral shifts were often packed with information about what to do and who to trust. I usually felt as though I had to learn everything twice, once the way others understood something and another time around to sort through the conventions of others with my own knowings. My sense of self-authority made me unpopular with some, but now in my 50s it puts me in a good position from which to think originally and question—to quote Adrienne Rich's (1979) brilliant turn of phrase—"the assumptions in which we are drenched" (p. 35).

In our times, we are preoccupied with the separateness and distinctiveness of our physical bodies from the world. What madness is this? Even at a material level, we are mostly made of water and trace minerals. The elements of the earth make for embodiment, otherwise we would not be here at all. *Our bodies are utterly embed-*

ded in the world. There appears to be a miracle above flesh and bones through which we live—call it what you will, spirit or awareness or consciousness. Mechanically, of course, our bodies have a seeming containment. I walk and move about the earth separately from you and you from me. In the Western cultures with which I’m most familiar, our bodies center our perceptual field. Our bodies are always there. Our egos, personalities, and identities cluster about our bodies’ perceptual field over time, intimately defining who and what we think we are. Our bodies are so magnificently organized and alert and relatively constant to our human perception that most of the time we imagine these separate bodies to be of singular significance—at least to ourselves.

Yet, they are more. *Our bodies are a web, a delicate filament of senses coupled to the world.* Into the world we laugh, cry, and sing, and the world calls back to us in the sounds of nature and other creatures. We touch and are touched by air. We render scents and smell air passing through our nostrils. We see and hear and are seen and heard by others. We taste, and in death we are tasted by the earth. Daily my awakened senses connect me to the sensorial world—the world of a welcoming mattress yielding to my touch, of a baby’s touch beckoning forgotten senses, of familiar scents grasping me as I pass through, of air embracing me as I reach out. There are a myriad of subtle senses, not five. Weblike and extended to the world, nuance beckons. Far less passes my notice. I’m more awake. Out beyond human chauvinism is a world of sensing and experience far more exacting and precious than those possessed by the smell, taste, touch, sight, and hearing. The five senses seem like starting points, a means of commerce to ourselves and others, human to human. How ridiculous to think the world is silent and voiceless because it hasn’t got primate vocal chords. I need only slow down and listen—and Wow! the world starts to reach out to me, bending to my knowing as I yield gently to its whispers.²

Still more, *the body has a kind of intrinsic teleology always pointing in the direction of wholeness and healing.* So particular to the moment, slowed down to hear an impulse as it arises, the body apprehends insights and solutions we cannot perceive with our thinking minds. Physically, if we give an injured or ill body what it needs in terms of food and sleep, it usually gets better. If we nourish ourselves with harmonious environments, beauty, and love, so much the better for our health. The body wants health and wholeness, not dis-ease. Even more subtly, if we slow down and listen to the body, it often signals what to eat, where and with whom to spend time, and what environments and insights nourish its senses with delight in the interest of maintaining health and well-being. Muscle and sinew hold memories, and frequently the body knows what will cure it. I am not suggesting that we give up Western medicine in favor of domestic herb gardens for remedies, but that we learn to take account of our body’s wisdom along with the profusion of medical information available to us in the 21st century. Through embodied writing, I and others have learned to listen to the minute visceral movements and senses of the body as though the body were an inward field of knowing. Listening inwardly to the body’s inner perceptual systems seems to be a fine art, requiring the skills of slowing down and listening within. The body reaches out to us in felt senses and impulses that are sometimes immediately translated into words, images, and sounds and sometimes not. But the body is always communicating, expressing its pleasure in

health and wholeness.

Even more intrinsic to the body is the awakened body of a vaster intelligence. In observing my own experience and that of others, it is clear to me that the mind does not wake up in enlightenment by itself. *The body wakes up in enlightenment*. First, there is no such thing as a physical mind. It is a concept we made up. We are drenched in the ideology of mind. I know where the brain is, but as for the mind I do not have a clue. But I do know where my body is. I experience how it extends inwardly and outwardly to the world. I can point to it, feel it, know it more each day through the waking of my senses. After years of meditation and spiritual practice, my seemingly endless, tape-recorded thoughts are quieting down. I feel my body more alert and waking up. It is now more attuned to the inward and outward senses; the sensuous matrix within enmeshes me with the sensuous matrix of the world. Interwoven in this way, we are one vast field of sensing. Though I may be speaking for myself and a few kindred spirits, I like my full sensing body more than the habituated, shut-down, Cartesian divide I've known for several decades. I'm tired of the split between my body and the world. If we create our realities as we go along through history, why should we not at least create one we like? I am making my choice. Readers, you make yours.

As for the future, I'm convinced that the body we know in our time is not the body we will know in the future. *The body of the future will be far more alert and extended to the world—vastly so*. At some point in the not-so-distant future, we will drop the notion that our bodies are limited to our physical bodies and senses. Our bodies will be more a field of resonance. Our future bodies will be more what takes place between our physical bodies, the interstices of experience—not me, not we or you, but between. This lived body will be more than flesh and form; it will be life itself evolving, changing, summoning the new in an unknown but nonetheless forward trajectory. Affirming knowledge told in spiritual traditions throughout the ages, our future bodies may be like breath herself, an awakening of spirit between us all.

NOTES

1. A fuller account of the relationship of sympathetic resonance and impedance of validity in scientific accounts can be found in Braud and Anderson (1998).
2. See Abrams (1996) for a beautifully presented account of our relationship to the more-than-human world.

REFERENCES

- Abram, D. (1996). *The spell of the sensuous: Perception and language in a more-than-world*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Anderson, R. (1998a). Intuitive inquiry: A transpersonal approach. In W. Braud & R. Anderson, *Transpersonal research methods for the social sciences: Honoring human experience* (pp. 69-94). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Anderson, R. (1998b). *The natural immensity of being woman: Implications for an embodied science*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Anderson, R. (2000). Intuitive inquiry: Interpreting objective and subjective data. *ReVision: The Journal of Consciousness and Transformation*, 22(4), 31-39.
- Brannon, H. (1999). *The lived experience of chronic physical pain and suffering*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation proposal, Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, Palo Alto, CA.

- Braud, W., & Anderson, R. (1998). *Transpersonal research methods for the social sciences: Honoring human experience*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Colaizzi, P. F. (1973). *Reflection and research in psychology: A phenomenological study of learning*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt Publishing.
- Dufrechou, J. (2001). *Coming home to nature through the body: An intuitive inquiry into experiences of grief, weeping, and other deep emotions in response to nature*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation proposal, Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, Palo Alto, CA.
- Friedman, L., & Moon, S. (Eds.). (1997). *Being bodies: Buddhist women on the paradox of embodiment*. Boston: Shambhala.
- Giorgi, A. (1985). *Phenomenology and psychological research*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- Heidegger, M. (1962). *Time and being*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Heery, B. (2000). *Awakening spirit in the body: A heuristic exploration of peak or mystical experiences in the practice of Aikido*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation proposal, Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, Palo Alto, CA.
- Heery, B. (2001). *Crunch*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Husserl, E. (1989). *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy. Book 2: Studies in phenomenology of constitution*. Boston: Kluwer. (Original work published 1952)
- Kuhn, R. (2001). *Sailing as a transformational experience*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, Palo Alto, CA.
- Levin, D. M. (1999). The ontological dimension of embodiment: Heidegger's thinking of being. In D. Welton (Ed.), *The body: Classic and contemporary readings* (pp. 122-149). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.
- Lynch, K. S. (2000). *Each age a lens: A transpersonal perspective of Emily Dickinson's creative process*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation proposal, Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, Palo Alto, CA.
- McIver, K. (1998). *Spiritual embodiment and clay*. Unpublished manuscript.
- McIver, K. (2001). *Spirit into form: The experience of clay as a spiritual practice*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, Palo Alto, CA.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962). *Phenomenology of perception*. (C. Smith, Trans.). London: Routledge & Keegan Paul.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1968). *The visible and the invisible*. (A. Lingis, Trans.). Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Moustakas, C. (1990). *Heuristic research: Design, methodology, and applications*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Phelon, C. (2001). *Healing presence: An intuitive inquiry into the presence of the psychotherapist*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, Palo Alto, CA.
- Rich, A. (1979). *When we dead awaken: Writing as re-vision. On lies, secrets, and silence*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Rich, B. (2000). *Blowing the shofar*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Riordan, L. (2000). *The experience of wilderness adventure: Integrating the transformative aspects of adventure into everyday life*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation proposal, Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, Palo Alto, CA.
- Riordan, L. (2001). *Buddha konasana*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Valle, R. (Ed.). (1998). *Phenomenological inquiry in psychology: Existential and transpersonal dimensions*. New York: Plenum Press.
- Van Kaam, A. (1966). *Existential foundations of psychology*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- Van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive*

- pedagogy*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Von Eckartsberg, R. (1986). *Life-world experience: Existential-phenomenological research approaches in psychology*. Washington, DC: Center for Advanced Research in Phenomenology.

The Author

Rosemarie Anderson, Ph.D., is professor of transpersonal psychology at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology and an Episcopal priest serving in Santa Cruz, CA. She is a coauthor with William Braud, Ph.D., of Transpersonal Research Methods for the Social Sciences: Honoring Human Experience (Sage Publications, 1998). She has developed intuitive inquiry, an interpretive approach to research that incorporates the multidimensional levels of experience particularly appropriate to the study of transpersonal experiences.