

EMBODIMENT IS MEDICINE: RECLAIMING THE NON-VERBAL INTELLIGENCE OF THE BODY IN MODERN MEDICINE

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The Silencing of the Communicative Body

I used to describe medicine's habit of silencing the intelligence of the body as a 'disembodied crisis'. While I find this description to be an accurate diagnosis, did you notice what happens to your body and perception when you read those words? Take a moment to slowly speak 'disembodied crisis' out loud a few times. Notice how your body responds. What happens to your breath, body and feeling as you voice those words? Speak, pause and listen to your interiority. For me, the first thing I noticed was how this description gathered my internal energy - my awareness - behind my forehead into a sharp focus-point directed outwards. To the place of cognitive focus and intellectual analysis.

Cognitive analysis is the mode of knowledge prioritized by modern Western medicine (biomedicine) [1] and medical education. Naming biomedicine is important, as the silencing of the intelligence of the speaking body is a cultural habit that is unique to this specific lineage of medicine and science [2, 3]. French physiologist Claude Bernard, who is widely regarded as the 'founder of modern medicine' [4] described his vision for physiology in 1878 [5] as such:

"By the physico-chemical sciences, man proceeds to the conquest of brute nature, of dead nature: all the earth sciences [...] are nothing other than the rational exercise of the domination of man over the world. In this, is physiology like the other sciences? Can science which studies the phenomena of life pretend to master them? Does it [physiology] intend to subjugate living [human] nature as dead [non-human] nature has been subjected? We do not hesitate to answer in the affirmative. Physiology must therefore be an active and conquering science in the manner of physics and chemistry."

Let us pause and breathe so that the violent winds of subjugation of both people and planet carried by these words subside. I am quoting these words to make visible that the silencing of the speaking, intelligent body is in the origin seed of what became the biomedical tradition.

Letting Go of a Harmful Habit

The connective tissue between Claude Bernard's philosophical imagination of 'subjugating nature' and contemporary medicine's habit of silencing the communicative body is the domination by cognitive analysis over other forms of intelligence.

This is because the body's intelligence cannot be *experienced* analytically and thus remains obscured. Becoming attuned to how the body speaks requires a different mode of listening.

Disease and the body being taught as mechanical, medical objects [6] that can be controlled is a symptom of this same habit and imagination. When a clinician describes "controlling" my Type 1 diabetes, I hear echoes of this lineage. I know it is unintended, and not the speakers' fault. Culture, practices and habits are all inherited. They become embodied habits (or in this case, disembodied habits), shaping how we touch, see, perceive and act.

Yet the intelligence of the body can never fully be subjugated. Neither can disease nor illness. After a lifetime of living with/against/despite/alongside Type 1 diabetes, my body has let me know, repeatedly, that control is an illusion. My chronically brilliant body (the language I prefer in place of "chronically ill") is a wild river, perhaps an oceanic sea. I steer my ship the best I can and do my best to not awaken storms. Being told to control (or conquer, in Bernard's words) these waters led me to a volcanic eruption of jest and a quoting of Hamlet: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio [Bernard], than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

Remembering the Body's Intelligence

Qi is one name for the intelligence of the body from the Tradition of East Asian Medicine. In Acupuncture, there is nothing special about the needles that are used: it's not the needles that are the medicine. The work is done by your *Qi*, or life-force. The medicine in Acupuncture is your own body's intelligence finding a new conversation within your system, stimulated by the needle placements.

Qi can be described as the subtle energy of the body. It is not reducible only to biological function, which is where the gap with the biomedical canon emerges. Qi Gong [7], which I practice and incorporate into my teaching of embodiment, is about stabilizing your *Qi*. Both practices evolved from the understanding that it is the body's own intelligence that is the medicine. When I describe my body as a wild river that I can steer but not control, I am acknowledging -- with reverence and humility -- its agency, intelligence and will. It is this wisdom that Bernard's philosophy seems to have forgotten, for to believe that the body and disease can be conquered is to deny the body's deeper intelligence, personhood and relational autonomy [8].

When I spoke the words "disembodied crisis" out loud and listened for my body's response, there was also an alertness and a faint but present bracing vigilance that arose in my head and chest. My breath tightened. At the same time, a kind of hollowed out cavity behind my heart opened. I can recognize that this cavity holds the traces in my nervous system of deeply imprinted feelings of loss, depletion, and grief.

Embodied healing does not mean that such traces are completely erased, or "cured." I honor the memory my body holds at the cellular level [9]. Rather, healing means I am no longer overwhelmed and taken over by these nervous system states. This is what "stabilizing *Qi*" means - though there are other ways to express this. I can notice, observe and acknowledge these bodily states, because I have allowed myself to feel them, receive their lessons and communication. The stabilization that emerges from deep embodied healing leads to developing the capacity to remain grounded in one's 'center self' through the waves of life.

Embodiment is a Practice of Listening to the Worlds Beneath Words

This kind of embodied attunement is a practice. It is a skillset that can be trained over time. This is my 16th year of working with the intelligence of my body, and my 10th year of teaching embodiment in medicine to patient, student and clinician communities. Before I could teach it, I was brought to my knees in surrender. This is how my learning of embodiment began: a spiritual crisis that opened a floodgate. The wisdom of my own life-long chronically brilliant body, and all "it" had to say, would no longer remain silenced. [10]

Words carry worlds. Those worlds are made of embodied memories and sensations that are unique to each of our life-paths, traumas, ancestries, and more. Disease, illness, disability is never isolated from this greater tapestry - it becomes interwoven into these threads, shaping and being shaped by them. This is

why the same illness may awaken distinctly unique existential territories within different people. My childhood Type 1 diabetes diagnosis was interwoven with familial developmental trauma, contributing to a deeply fractured sense of self-worth. Embodiment asks us to embrace the messy knots of our body-mind-spirits, untangling each thread slowly, over time. This inner work, while by no means easy, is the work of inner freedom that then moves outwards to every person you encounter. It is directly connected to freeing the subtle energy of your body.

Given the distinct life fabrics of each one of us, “disembodied crisis” may have opened a different pattern of affective states and sensations in your own body. (The language of “disembodied crisis” awakening cognitive analysis and bodily defense is also why I now instead use the description of *medicine's habit of silencing the body's wisdom*. Notice how differently that feels in your body!)

What *worlds* do those body-states hold? This question matters greatly in the secret chambers of embodied healing.

Learning the Language of the Communicative Body

As the body's intelligence cannot be perceived analytically, embodiment training is experiential. Carefully designed exercises and practices bring the practitioner into direct experience of their bodily communication. The body's intelligence communicates through breath, rhythm, feeling, sensation, imagination and embodied imagery.

In response to the mechanistic approach to the body and disease, I developed a training curriculum for medical students and seasoned clinicians in embodiment. It is common for students to ask, “why are we focusing on our own bodies? It's about our patients.” The answer is deceptively simple: you can guide your patients to listen to the intelligence of their bodies only when you have learned how to listen to your own.

My training curriculum is designed to open access in the practitioner to these modes of the body's communication. To offer a vivid example, [*this 3-minute video](#) has the voices of students describing their experiences. Remember how words carry embodied worlds? This video documents embodied exercises that make the meaning of that sentence tangible through direct experience.

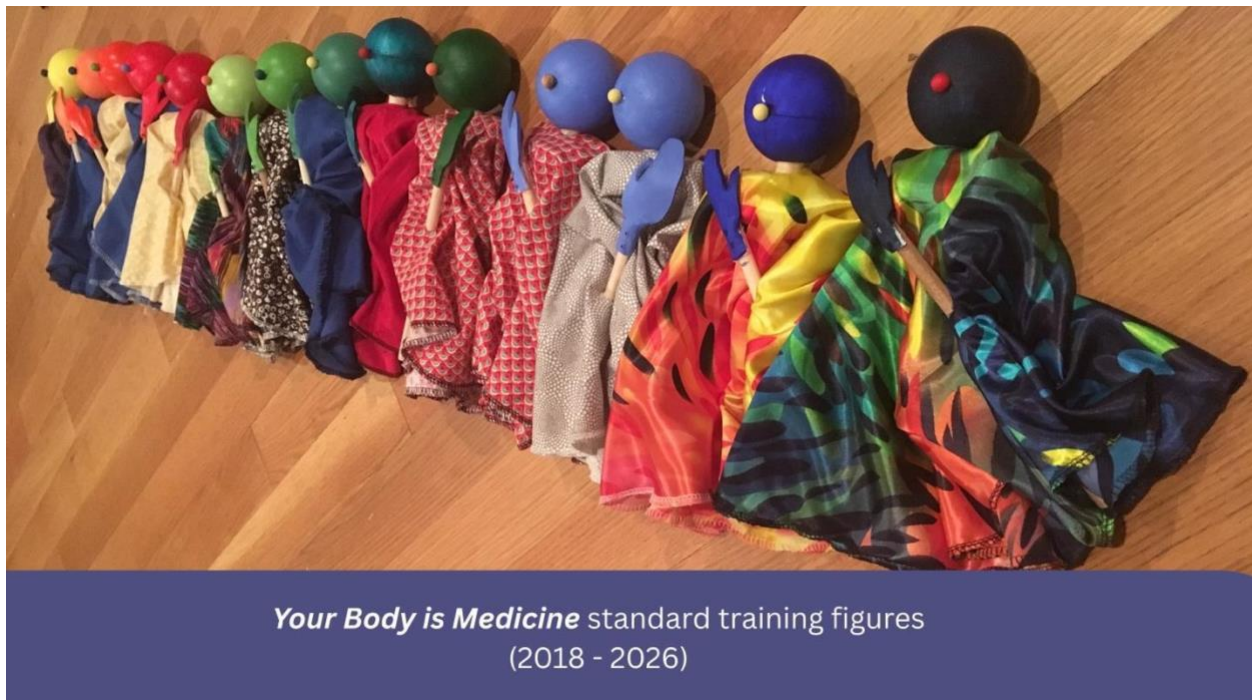
I invite you to pause reading and watch the video before going further. These exercises lead each student to experience how emotion and imagery lives in connection to their bodies. How their breaths and bodies carry meaning, emotion and memory. Students are shown working with *training figures*. The audio is student voices describing the places in the body where each felt imagery and sensation arise, in response to a specific word they chose. Notice how this is also a practice of embodied community and teamwork.

The training figures share one similarity in their role to the needles in acupuncture: *it is not about the object*. It is about what working with these objects gives you access to in your bodily intelligence.

This training changes *how* listening is enacted by the practitioner, it expands what is perceived and what information is deemed relevant. Importantly, the training method itself is embodied. This means learning how to listen to, from, and *through* your communicative body. This shift alone can take many sessions.

The cognitive muscle is so habituated and overtrained, it takes many people time to allow themselves to listen, work and even play from the non-cognitive/analytic parts of themselves (I am side-stepping discussions on the nature of consciousness, embodied cognition, etc. in this short text!) Playfulness is an important component of the training. It builds the capacity for nervous system states to no longer grip and overpower the person, strengthening and stabilizing the 'center self.'

* <https://vimeo.com/279149660/d3f9b9bca8?share=copy&fl=sv&fe=ci>



New Training Paths to Reconnect with The Body's Intelligence

I am aware how different this training is from learning about the biological mechanisms of disease from a textbook, being expected to fulfill checkboxes, or even reading patient narratives. I want to be clear that each of the prior-listed methods are important and necessary. At the same time, learning how to perceive and work with the non-verbal intelligence and communication of the body requires a different approach than

what medical education, continuing medical education, and even the medical/health humanities currently practice.

Illness very often disrupts the sense of trust between person and body. The felt-sense of embodied trust, of being home in one's body [11], can only be reconstituted through embodied practice. Without this, healing – regardless of illness or disability status – is impossible.

In collaboration with a leading physician of compassionate care, we interviewed three cohorts of students two, three, and four-years post-training. Many were completing medical school or in residency. They described concrete impacts in how they practice medicine, in how they listen to and touch patients' bodies. Following this, we began bringing this work to seasoned clinicians.

The body's communicative brilliance cannot be accessed nor supported when doctors, nurses, and people in the healing professions are trained to perceive, think and listen only analytically, are embedded in a culture and system that rewards and applauds their disembodiment, and furthermore largely dismisses the mysterious, non-linear and largely non-verbal languages that are part of the body's foundational intelligence. It is only when cognitive brilliance is brought in service to this deeper intelligence that holistic, embodied care and true healing emerge.

The Body's Intelligence is the Foundation of Medicine

The medicine of insulin grants me access to life. Learning how to listen to and *trust* the intelligence of my body is the medicine that allowed me to heal (while still taking my insulin). The two co-exist on an equal playing field, without hierarchy. Notice how I am purposefully expanding the definition of what constitutes medicine. I am not describing the intelligence of the body as “complementary” to insulin or other biomedical interventions. I am asserting that without acknowledging and knowing how to support, respond to and guide the body's inner intelligence and communication, biomedical intervention can become a form of assault.

I believe we are finally at the beginning of this return to the body. Biomedicine 'reclaiming' the body as a knowing, communicative, and relational participant in care and healing will be a quiet revolution that transforms the practice of modern Western medicine from the inside out. It will happen slowly and steadily, as practitioner by practitioner begin to quietly acknowledge and train in how to listen to their own bodies.

When healers allow themselves, and are allowed, to heal (by being institutionally and culturally supported to do so), they can become supportive guides for the healing paths of the people they serve. This will restore the body's intelligence to its rightful place: as the foundation of medicine in all medical traditions.

Dear clinicians and patients: your body *is* medicine. ■

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Biographical Note

Marina 'Heron' Tsaplina is a NYC-based award-winning artist, writer, teacher and scholar in medical humanities. Her work centers the intelligence of the body within medicine, disability, and environmental healing. She holds a Master's in Bioethics and Medical Humanities and is a certified Somatic Developmental Trauma Therapy Coach. Her embodied training program, Your Body is Medicine, was developed during her time as a Kienle Scholar in the Medical Humanities at the Penn State College of Medicine, as co-founder of the Reimagine Medicine program at Duke University, through a residency with the Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine, and by working with over 600 patients, students and clinicians. From 2024 - 2026, she was an Artist in Residence with Dr. Rana Awdish at Henry Ford Health to bring Your Body is Medicine to seasoned clinicians. She loves translating between the worlds of art and science, and helping doctors to trust the profound mystery and knowledge of their own bodies in service to their patients.