

workshop excerpts:

Planet Home, Body Earth, Mother World:
A Body–Mind Approach to Developing Ecological Consciousness

I. Introduction

The theme of this paper is: if we want to bring about effective action for planetary healing, then we need to develop a sense of kinship with the Earth. In order to develop that sense of kinship, we need to allow a transformation of consciousness to take place in us. We need to move from a mentality that promotes conquest to a consciousness that recognizes and promotes connection.

We can provoke a transformation to “connection consciousness,” not by any amount of intellectualization, but by bringing awareness to and energizing the body, particularly the belly.

Why the body?

Our bodies, I believe, are a gift from the stars.
Stars showering particles of light and sound
Brought the earth into being,
and the substance of who we are.
How could we be anything but kin? (1)

II. Intention

This paper presents the scope of an experiential workshop on a body–mind approach to developing ecological consciousness. In this paper, I’ll elaborate on the theme I’ve proposed. Some experiences with embodying “conquest” and “connection” consciousness will follow. In the workshop itself, I teach some movement and breathing exercises that energize the body, especially the body’s center.

As I summarize, I’ll suggest what some of the implications of women energizing our bellies may be—for our culture as well as for women’s role in planetary healing.

III. Conquest Mentality, Connection Consciousness, and the Belly

“Conquest Mentality”

But first, why am I wearing this tie?

[Grasping the paisley–patterned men’s tie that’s knotted around my neck and pulling it to the side, as if it were a hangman’s noose:] This tie is a great symbol (and almost literally a tool)

for the way our culture chokes off body awareness at the neck, cutting off sensation from the neck down, isolating awareness in the head, isolating the intellect, allowing vitality only from the neck up.

What is the implication of this body/mind separation for our relationship with nature?

Karlfried Graf Von Dürkheim puts it concisely:

The man dominated by the intellect,
constructing a scale of values
based only on his intellect,
puts Nature,
understood as mere “material,”
in the lowest rank. (2)

[Gestures demonstrate high and low,
displaying a vertical axis.]

This tie represents our linear, vertical-axis, hierarchical way of thinking and valuing. This mentality is part of the “dominator” pattern of society that Riane Eisler identifies in *The Chalice and the Blade* as our cultural tradition in the West for the last 3,000 years, a patriarchal system of ranking and control enforced by men’s violence and the threat of violence. (3)

If we change the pattern of our ties from regimental stripe to paisley, decorated with leaves and flowers—and keep wearing the ties—we’re not changing anything. If we change our vocabulary from “resource exploitation” to “ecology”—and maintain our mentality of hierarchy and control—we’re not changing anything.

If the imbalance underlying our ecological crisis is, in Dürkheim’s words, “hypertrophy of the rational intellect,” (4) the proper response to the crisis is not more intellectualization.

Our challenge, rather, is to “walk our talk.” We can talk about peace, ecology, oneness with the Earth. How do we be peace, be ecology, be one with the Earth—in actual practice? Is there a way? Is there an alternative to the tie?

“Connection Consciousness”

[Taking off the tie and lifting up my sweater to reveal a belly pouch:] I’m here to say “yes.” I say “yes,” and so does the poet and potter M.C. Richards. In her words:

When on center, the self feels different:
one feels warm,
in touch,
the power of life a substance
like an air
in which one lives

and has one's being
with
all other things. (5)

[Final gesture is horizontal and inclusive.]

When we sense ourselves at center, we know that we share our life, our being, “with all other things.” What better way to express an ecological consciousness, a consciousness of connection?

I propose an alternative to the tie—the belly pouch, a container for what we carry at center.

Archeological evidence suggests that humankind's first tool was not a weapon—was not a cudgel for us to use for bopping each other over the head. Rather, our first tool may well have been an accessory to the act of nurturing—a bag for women toting infants and gathering food. (6,7,8)

This belly pouch represents a way of being that values connection, mutuality, nourishment. Such a way of being corresponds to the “partnership” pattern of society, that Riane Eisler identifies as our pre-historic cultural heritage and the necessary direction for our cultural evolution.

Partnership societies, based on egalitarian relationships between women and men, apparently flourished in Old Europe and the Near East from approximately 6500 BCE to 4000 BCE. Their cosmology placed the Goddess in the position of primacy. Accordingly, they recognized “the centrality of the values symbolized by the nurturing and regenerating powers incarnated in the female body...” And they appointed women to roles of preeminent social, economic, political, and religious power. (9)

Facilitated by women's leadership, such societies concerned themselves more with linking than with ranking. For thousands of years, they sustained peace, agricultural plenty, technological invention, and artistic excellence. (10) Repeated waves of nomadic invasion destroyed them by about 1200 BCE. (11)

Throughout history, “feminine” partnership values have repeatedly resurged into popular culture, yet these periods of relative peace and cultural evolution have been followed by reassertion of male domination and increasingly repressive periods of cultural regression and warfare. (12)

In our era of pending ecological disaster and nuclear weaponry, we need to—and perhaps we can—establish partnership values, a “connection consciousness,” as our cultural norm. Our planetary survival depends on it. (13)

The Belly

The locus of the “nurturing and regenerating powers incarnated in the female body” is in fact woman’s belly. The source for our modern word “belly” is the Old English word for bag —“belig,” or “belg.” (14) The belly is indeed the “bag” that carries our organs for digesting food and incorporating nourishment. It’s the “bag” in which we women carry new life and from which a new human being, a new world, emerges.

From a Western perspective, the belly is measurably the center of our bodies: it’s the center of the line running from head to foot. The belly is also, from the viewpoint of Newtonian physics, our “center of mass.”

Cultures around the world, however, recognize the belly as much more—the gateway to transpersonal, spiritual power. Such cultures offer practical ways (traditions of dance, rituals of healing, martial arts) to develop the belly as a source of spiritual strength. These physical practices increase a person’s inner sense of vitality, security, satisfaction, and confidence—and also generate an undeniable sense of unity with Nature.

The Japanese term for the belly and its transpersonal power is “hara.” The value which the Japanese culture places upon developing hara (“hara wo neru”) shows up in the way the word occurs in idioms of common usage.

The fully mature person, for example, is known as “hara no okii hito”—the one who has finished his belly. “Haragei” literally means “belly art”—any activity which a person, having attained maturity, accomplishes perfectly yet without effort.

“Hara de kangaenasai” means “please think with your belly”: go to a source deeper than the rational intellect, go to the essence of your whole being. And “hara-goe” denotes “belly voice,” the kind of voice whose volume and depth express integrated wholeness and total presence. (15)

Based on his studies in Japan, Dürkheim describes the person with hara as having “an inner calm from which springs the greatest possible presence of mind and the greatest possible capacity for endurance.” (16) Further, a person developing hara “joyously experiences a new closeness to himself and to the world, to people and things, to nature....” (17)

Dürkheim asserts that these and other qualities of hara—discernment, creativity, flexibility, generosity, confidence, serenity, patience, and security—derive from sensing a steady, tangible connection with the universal life force. He writes: “Hara is the very embodiment of man’s contact with the fundamental powers of the Greater Life manifested in him.”(18)

In others words, people who demonstrate hara—people who are, in our terms, “gutsy”—know themselves to be infused by the life force that permeates Nature as a whole. There is no separation; there is intimate connection.

When I ask myself what public figure in our recent history has demonstrated *hara*, I think immediately of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.—his voice, his endurance, his presence.

VI. Embodying Consciousness

I'd like to return to the theme that I stated earlier: that for planetary healing, we need to invoke a transformation of consciousness—from a mentality that promotes “conquest” to a consciousness that recognizes and promotes “connection.”

Attributes of “*Conquest Mentality*” and “*Connection Consciousness*”

“Conquest” and “connection” are only two of many words that can tag these distinct ways of being in the world. I'd like to hear how you relate to these two ways of being. What are the qualities, dimensions, or attributes of each mode for you? [Words that workshop participants have brainstormed include:]

conquest

control/mechanistic
speech as weapon
interruption, volume, mystification
taming/“improvement”
dogma
consumption
uptight
competition

connection

companion gardening
quiet
active listening
wildness
direct experience, mysticism
communion
relaxed/mellow
cooperation

Here are additional attributes and idioms that characterize these ways of being for me:

conquest

good/bad subject
Utopian idealism
abstraction/concept
submission/rebellion
punishment
fight/flight
control
domination
standardization
power over
killing
pornographic
ranking

connection

non–subject (22)
valuing context (22)
experience
non–compliance/innovation
reward/appreciation
presence
facilitation
partnership
individuation
empowerment
nourishing
erotic
linking

hierarchy
separation/alienation
at the head of/the upper hand
remote
edict
taking/giving
fragmentation
thrust
direction
free-lance
higher
Higher Power
either/or
win/lose

teamwork
contact/participation
in the middle of/central
involved
dialogue
sharing
integration
matrix
organization
circuit-riding
deeper
Ground of Being
both/and
relate

Now let's see how these distinctive ways of being show up in the body.

Models

In a moment, I'll ask you to stand, find a partner, and spread out in the room so that each pair has privacy and plenty of space.

First, review the attributes of the "conquest mentality" that make the most sense for you. You might think of people you know, or characters on TV or in the movies, who demonstrate aspects of this mentality—either as dominators or as victims.

Now, decide who goes first. The person who goes first faces their partner and models a person who proudly lives in this "conquest mentality." Think the way that person thinks, stand the way that person stands, walk the way that person walks. If you like, give voice to a statement that expresses your point of view.

Partners, your job is to observe. Note this person's posture. What's the alignment of the head, neck, and spine? Which areas are rigid and tense; which areas are loose and relaxed? Where does the body receive or restrict the process of breathing? Where are the eyes directed?

When this person walks, notice which part of the body leads the motion. What kind of contact do the feet make with the floor? Which body parts seem strong or weak; closed or open? What kind of flexibility appears at the shoulders, elbows, hips, and knees? How fully does the whole body enter into the movement? When they talk, notice the volume, pitch, speed, and quality of their voice.

Share your observations and comments with each other and then switch roles so that each of you has a chance to model the "conquest mentality" for the other.

Then repeat the process. This time, each person in turn models a person living in "connection consciousness" while the other observes. Notice the same factors of posture,

breathing, movement style, and voice quality. Observe whether and how these factors change from one way of being to the other.

[Pause for practice and then discussion, highlighting contrasts in alignment of head with spine, tilt of pelvis, flexion of knee joints, distribution of weight on feet.]

Now, as a pair, mime the relationship between two people in “conquest mentality” and two people in “connection consciousness.” Take a moment to mime the interaction between a person intent on “conquest” and a person intent on “connection.” [Pause for practice and discussion]

We find that our thoughts and values shape our bodies, conditioning the way we stand, move, and breathe.

It’s not a one-way street, though. The mind and the body are in two-way communication. By choosing the way we stand, move, and breathe, we can shape our consciousness.

VIII. Centering as Partners

Next, I offer an exercise, “Breathing Together,” to practice as partners. This exercise is a way to make a strong connection with another human being by synchronizing your breathing patterns.

Then I teach a belly-centering exercise, “Dancing with the Touch of Wind,” to do as partners. In this experience one person is the Dancer and the other is the Wind.

Participant: “As I opened my eyes after being the Dancer I found myself looking out through the picture window and saw the fir tree out there. My fingers [she demonstrates: her hands are poised in front of her heart] were the tree’s fingers. The tree’s light green needles at the tips of its branches were like fingers, like my fingers.”

Participant: “I was surprised by the awesome responsibility and tenderness I felt when the other was the Dancer and I was the Wind.”

Both of these comments bring to life the actuality of an ecological consciousness, a consciousness of connection.

IX. Implications

As we women honor and energize our bellies, we increasingly bring forth the “connection consciousness” that is necessary for resolving the environmental crisis generated by the dominator society’s conquest mentality.

In fact, as we honor and energize our bellies, we create—in seed form—an alternative to the dominator pattern of society at every level.

What is the thread that runs between individual women strengthening our bellies and the politics of family, society, and culture? What thread connects individual women strengthening our bellies with a global shift to the partnership societies that can promote planetary healing?

I'll respond to these questions first by painting a picture of the woman who has developed hara, a woman who lives from a strong, energetically active belly.

Such a woman is “gutsy,” meaning “spirited, courageous.” (23) She is:

centered: she remains calm, retaining penetrating insight, whatever challenges she encounters.

independent, autonomous: she cultivates her inner wisdom and honors her internal authority; she generates ideas, terms, and values that go beyond the patterns of conventional discourse.

powerfully present: she is able and willing to speak the truth of her experience and the truth of what's happening in the present moment.

intimately connected to—in communion with—the life force that pervades the universe: she draws upon a spiritual source for the physical, emotional, and intellectual strength she manifests.

in erotic relationship with life itself: she is in charge of her sexuality and integrates her sexual energy into her total life experience.

self-empowered: she provides leadership in organizing relationships and resources for the common good.

physically competent and confident.

Such a woman is:

not easily flustered, scattered, or intimidated.

not dependent, subservient, or submissive to external authority: she does not restrict her values and actions to cultural norms.

not silent, compliant, or approval-seeking: she does not enable or acquiesce to denial of what's happening in the present moment; she does not escape into past memories or future fantasies to avoid confronting brutality or humiliation, or to avoid sensations of anger or joy.

not an addict or consumer: she does not seek things or relationships to simulate an authentic connection with the universal life force.

not ashamed of her body shape, size, or functioning; she is not ashamed of her sexuality nor does she confine her sexuality to facilitating men's sexual release.

not a victim; she does not cooperate in being the target of violence or exploitation.

As Amy Chasteen demonstrates in her paper, "The House That Gender Built" (24), women's "socialized fear perspective" determines how most women live. In other words, fear conditions every dimension of women's lives. Women's pervasive fear is exactly counterpart to the pervasive violence and threat of violence against women in Western society. (25)

Consequently, of all the qualities that women can develop through strengthening hara, the quality of fearlessness is potentially the most transformative. If the dominator pattern of society maintains its power through violence and the threat of violence, women who are unafraid are no longer subject to its control. (26)

Accordingly, the impact of women strengthening our hara is potentially enormous. We can appreciate what the impact might be once we consider how our culture already undermines, and assaults, the inherent power of women's belly. We have only to examine social and economic justice issues related to body shape and size, sexuality, pregnancy and childbirth, substance abuse, distribution of wealth, and employment....

The Cultural Significance of Women Developing Hara

As we develop a critical awareness, we can clearly see the ways in which our culture has disempowered women—from the structure of fashionable clothing to the structure of the economy, from tight jeans to tight credit.

Honoring and energizing our belly, strengthening hara, is a way for women to begin empowering ourselves even in the context of a dominator society.

As women develop hara, we can enable ourselves to redefine our social roles. We can empower ourselves to invent attractive alternatives to patterns of violence, exploitation, and deprivation. In so doing, we may well bring forth a thorough transformation of our culture.

Imagine women with the qualities of hara:

We would no longer seek outside of ourselves for approval and validation. We would be comfortable with our bodies' shape and size. We would wear clothes which allowed us to breathe deeply. We would enjoy a

genuine sense of satisfaction and fulfillment, rather than “shopping till we drop.” Our energy and attention would be free from obsessions and addictions. We would reclaim our power to assist others in the healing process. We would take charge of our sexuality, together with the process of pregnancy and birth.

X. Directions

The ecological crisis is often termed the “rape” of the Earth. What role will men and women play in reversing this violence and creating conditions for planetary healing—including a shift toward a partnership society?

Michael Simmons addresses men’s need to control—the core force shaping the dominator society and the structural inequality between men and women:

We men tend to feel that we are under the constant control of women, whilst, in reality, at the institutional level, we are always in control.... [T]his incongruity is because of our confusing the experience of early powerlessness in our relationships with the women who looked after us when we were young with our actual adult situation of sexist domination.

[T]he key issue for men ...is giving up control.... The underlying difficulty for us is that to decide to give up control is an extremely frightening and humiliating step to take; ‘real men’ are expected to be in control at every level. (39)

Simmons articulates the current challenge for men and his own commitment to action:

to decide to step aside, to strategise in every situation how to enable women to fully take charge, and to understand that this is the key leadership job for men at this point....

I decide to encourage, support and assist every woman I currently know and every woman I have yet to meet to advance into full world leadership, regardless of how humiliating or terrifying it may feel to me. (40)

At this time, women are indeed called to world leadership. Women are called to bring forth a society based on partnership rather than domination, based on connection rather than conquest. Because women are uniquely equipped to do so.

As socio–linguist Deborah Tannen has demonstrated in *You Just Don’t Understand*, even women’s typical style of communication serves to create relationships of mutual support among people. (41) Adding fearlessness and the other qualities of *hara* to our skill in creating connections, women are well qualified to provide both the direction and the context for planetary healing.

XI. Conclusion

[I thank the participants for their presence and invite us to stand together in a circle. From my belly pouch, I hand each person a button to wear that shows the Earth from space, titled with the word "Home."]

Do you wish to heal the planet?

An enormous task!

Yet the planet lives within you.

You bear the world within your belly!

Notes:

- (1) Excerpt from “How You Will Know That I Come In Peace,” © Lisa Sarasohn, 1990.
- (2) Karlfried Graf Von Dürkheim, *Hara: The vital centre of man*, Unwin, 1962, 1977; p. 123.
- (3) Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade*, Harper and Row, 1987, p. 56. See also Anne Wilson Schaef, *When Society Becomes an Addict*, Harper and Row, 1987, pp. 7–14. Schaef’s term for what Eisler calls the “dominator society” is the “Addictive System,” renaming what she had, in earlier works, called the “White Male System–Reactive Female System.”
- (4) Dürkheim, p.125.
- (5) M.C. Richards, *Centering in Pottery, Poetry, and the Person*, Wesleyan University Press, 1962, 1964, p.56.
- (6) Elizabeth Fisher, *Women’s Creation* (McGraw–Hill, 1975), quoted in Ursula LeGuin, “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” in *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places*, Grove Press, 1989, p. 166.
- (7) Eisler, p. 45. See also note 12 on p. 213 for additional references.
- (8) “It’s our ability to accessorize that separates us from the animals.” Spoken by Clairee Belcher (played by Olympia Dukakis) in “Steel Magnolias,” play and screenplay by Robert Harling.
- (9) Eisler, p. 27 and pp. 39–40.
- (10) *Ibid.*, pp. 29–42.
- (11) *Ibid.*, pp. 42–56.
- (12) *Ibid.*, pp. 135–155.
- (13) *Ibid.*, pp. 173–184. For another discussion of the “partnership” model of society, see Schaef, pp. 9–12. She renames what she had earlier called the “Emerging Female System” as the “Living Process System.”
- (14) Eric Partridge, *Origins: A short etymological dictionary of modern English*, Greenwich House, 1983, p. 63.
- (15) Dürkheim, pp. 51–54.
- (16) *Ibid.*, p. 32
- (17) *Ibid.*, p. 111.

- (18) Ibid., p. 70.
- (19) John Mohawk, remarks made during his keynote address at the Second Continental Conference on Social Ecology and Community Action, Townsend, TN on Friday night, May 29, 1992. Mohawk proposed “Utopian idealism” as a root cause for our ecological crisis.
- (20) “matrix me,” Lisa Sarasohn, 1991.
- (21) “Earthbeat,” Lisa Sarasohn, 1991.
- (22) Mohawk, *ibid.* He proposed valuing context (local setting, family stories, etc.) as an alternative to Utopian idealism, and being a “non–subject” as an alternative to being either a good or bad subject of oppression.
- (23) J.A. Simpson, et.al., *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., Clarendon Press, 1989, p. 970. The words “gut” and “gutsy” in our language seem to be the closest we come to “hara.”
- (24) Amy Chasteen, “The House That Gender Built: Women, Ecology, and Social Control,” paper delivered at the Second Continental Conference on Social Ecology and Community Action, Townsend, TN, Saturday, May 30, 1992.
- (25) Eisler, p. 140. The burning of 9 million women as “witches” in 13th to 16th century Europe testifies to the scale of violence that the dominator society has directed toward women in the past. In the present, Judi Bari testifies that the most serious acts of violence in the environmental movement have also been directed at women. While participating in an action to protect ancient redwood trees from logging, her pelvis was shattered by a bomb hidden in her car. (See Judi Bari, “The Feminization of Earth First!,” *Ms.*, May/June 1992, p. 85.)
- (26) See Schaeff, pp. 92–93: “Fear is what holds the Addictive System together. The system could not survive without it.”
- (27) “What Sags First?” in *Glamour*, July 1988, p. 140.
- (28) “Flattery Will Get You Anywhere” in *Saturday Evening Post*, December 1988, pp. 36–38.
- (29) “Jane Fonda’s 3 Best Potbelly Exercises” in *Redbook*, May 1989, p. 102.
- (30) Kim Chernin, *The Obsession: Reflections on the tyranny of slenderness*, Harper and Row, 1981, p. 198.
- (31) *Ibid.*, p. 143.
- (32) Sarah Buel, J.D., remarks made in her speech on “Family Violence,” plenary session on Friday, May 22, 1992 at the Conference on Women and Addiction, Asheville, NC.

- (33) Eisler, p. 141.
- (34) Ibid., p. 97.
- (35) Buel, *ibid.*
- (36) Cokie Roberts, commentator for National Public Radio, in her keynote address on Saturday afternoon, March 28, 1992 at the 1992 Women's Conference: Pathways to Progress, Asheville, NC.
- (37) Eisler, p. 177.
- (38) Ibid., note 29 on p. 234.
- (39) Michael Simmons, "Men Giving Up Sexist Control," in *Liberation*, n.d., p. 34.
- (40) Ibid., p. 35.
- (41) Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand*, Ballantine, 1990.