

EMBODYING CHANGE

by K.Sagovsky | Originally published in *Wann Wenn Nicht Wir** (S.Fischer, 2019) in German transl. by J.Marx

The crisis of disembodiment: As a whole, we are more disembodied than we have ever been. We are becoming a people who live their life behind screens: computer screens, phone screens, TV screens. In this widespread contemporary reality, the body is something that sits and stares, while life is lived in a virtual elsewhere – a realm where images of the body tend to be filtered and curated in the quest to present ‘perfection’.

In Western capitalist culture, the body is punishingly critiqued according to aesthetic, rather than experienced through action and sensation. For many, the new normal is to focus on getting the best-looking picture of yourself at the beach, rather than to revel in the feeling of hot sand beneath your toes, or the freshness of the sea as you dive down into the silence beneath the waves. Bit by bit we are forgetting how to live in the physical experience of each present moment. Instead we dissociate from our bodies to become expert in imagining how the outside eyes of others will see us in the images we are creating. We no longer notice how it feels to be present in the world.

In addition, for many people food is now found stacked on shelves in plastic packages under fluorescent light, water appears like magic at the turn of a tap, and movement takes place on treadmills in front of mirrors in air-conditioned cubes. Our everyday needs are met in such a way that we can easily ignore the simplest and most fundamental truth: that our bodies, like those of all animals, rely on fertile earth for food, on fresh water to drink, and clean air to breathe. None of our technological advances or virtual worlds change the fact that we are fragile flesh and blood and bone, and wholly dependent on a world that generously meets our basic needs for life.

We are in a constant process of exchange with the environment around us. The very inside of your physical self is connected second by second through breath to the world around you: we breathe in molecules of air that have passed through plants, trees, animals, other people. When we die our bodies disintegrate, returning to earth. We are not simply in the world but *of* it. We are the world. Along with water, air, earth, fire, plants, trees, and animals, our bodies are one part of nature’s intricate, delicately-balanced process of give and take.

While we remain disastrously disconnected from our bodies, it is easy to feel that nature is something outside of us – over there, somewhere else. We feel it is a shame we are destroying it, but not, ultimately, of critical concern. Only once we reconnect to ourselves as physical beings can we truly understand that in destroying nature’s balance, in continually taking too much and returning too little, we destroy ourselves.

Somatic awakening: Re-awakening the physical self leads to an embodied understanding of self, other, and environment as one universal, connected ecosystem in which each and every part is of equal value. Somatic awareness opens the doorway to new modes of being and living that recognise and respond to this fundamental truth (or the rediscovery of old modes, now ignored or forgotten). In German culture there is already a wealth of ways in which somatic awareness is being cultivated: movement practices such as Body Mind Centring, Contact Improvisation, Authentic Movement, and Feldenkrais are widely

available.¹ These encourage the participant to listen to their physical self, authentically connect with what is present there, and bring it into movement. Many emotions and experiences are unconsciously held in the body, and ignored over time. So somatic awakening can be a challenging experience in which people encounter both joy at re-meeting their deeper self, and also previously unprocessed emotions such as anger and grief. However, through a process of deep listening and focused attention, we not only find connection to what is already present in us, but by moving it we also allow old habits and patterns to change and develop, and can let go of what we no longer need to carry. By changing how we understand, inhabit, and communicate with our bodies, we simultaneously change both our personal and our collective worlds.

The importance of play: Cultivating embodiment leads to a greater awareness of physical impulses. Listening and responding to these physical impulse often results in playfulness. We tend to associate playing with children, and categorise it as a childhood pastime, but the instinct for play lives inside all of us. Typically we engage in less and less play as we take on the mantle of adulthood. Yet play is vital to our wellbeing.

Play takes place in a different kind of time and space than those we tend to occupy every day. Children who play do not keep track of time, they do not have to go to appointments, answer emails, or do their duty. To enter into play is to enter into a time outside time, a place where the wearying demands of pragmatism and responsibility recede for a while. Lifting these demands gives us a sense of lightness and joy. Play and laughter go hand in hand. In a world where the existential threat of climate crisis become more and more apparent every day, these moments of respite from heavy care and the push for action bring much needed healing and rejuvenation. They are present tense moments where we discover that experiencing the joy and beauty of living now is an important part of fighting for our future.

However, play is not only important as a means of renewal. It also serves as a space in which we seek to make sense of the world around us. Small children will often construct games modelled on particular social environments that they experience in their everyday life: role-playing as the doctor in a surgery, or the 'parent' of teddies and dolls. Through play we reflect our everyday experiences, and in re-making them are able to interrogate and reconstruct them in many different ways.

If we are to avert climate catastrophe we must find ways to re-imagine a world free from the structures of over-consumption, and the driving need for more more more. Play not only allows us to model familiar realities, but to imagine new worlds. Children on the beach build whole realms out of sand complete with their own architecture, inhabitants, and storylines. When playing we experiment with different ways of being, and bring entirely new possibilities into existence. This imaginative dream-space is vital to us as adults, as we examine and reconfigure our current, destructive way of life, and seek to re-imagine the structures of our existence.

Physical play allows us to develop modes of transgression, risk, and resilience. When we learn to climb trees or walk along the top of walls, we are also discovering how we can

¹ For more information on available classes and courses the Somatische Akademie is a great place to start: www.somatische-akademie.de Here you can find out what kind of practices exist, and then search for similar teachers and classes in your area.

push at the boundaries dictated by social convention and regulation. When we re-discover embodied play as adults, we realise we already have the skills we need to playfully disrupt our broken system. The child inside each of us waded into streams and tried standing on swings. This inner child knows how to delight in playful civil disobedience: in pitching colourful tents in the middle of busy roads, turning concrete bridges into flourishing gardens, and dancing freely in our urban centres.

Protest is physical action: The experience of being involved in an XR non-violent protest action mirrors the experience of being in playtime. People know that they will be there – occupying - for an extended period of time. This commitment to being at one location of protest takes them outside of their normal life and all the hurried doing it requires. The gathered masses are released from their usual relationship to structured time and space, and slowly begin to find ways of *being* rather than ways of *doing*. Play emerges in the singing of songs, spontaneous eruptions of dancing, storytelling and speeches, conversation and laughter.

As children, play teaches us to communicate, cooperate, and collaborate as we learn and experiment with new skills. In re-entering playtime we discover these skills anew. Just as in imaginative play, during protest actions people take on alternate roles from those they might normally have: handing out flyers, distributing water, preparing and serving food, supporting arrestees. We gather to protest, but in doing so we bring our bodies together into a space of play and suddenly new worlds emerge. New worlds which show us a different way of being is possible; one in which we can be fully present in our physical selves, and in which embodied experience brings far greater riches than money and possessions ever have.

The XR model for civil disobedience offers each of us a unique opportunity to re-engage with our physical reality. For non-violent direct action to succeed many people must be physically present. Images and reports may be spread online to maximise impact, but fundamentally it relies on people bringing themselves – their physical selves – into an embodied act of disruption. Rebels who lock themselves to railings bring their body into an extraordinary place of vulnerability to demonstrate the depth of their feeling, the strength of their need to act. As they occupy for hours, they feel the sun or the rain, they know the need to eat and to drink, they experience the fatigue of protest, fear of arrest, and the elation of the music and dancing that surrounds them. They bring their whole embodied self into an act that demands our attention, and calls on everyone who sees it to respond in kind – to protect life by first bringing your whole self into the playful act of living.