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CHAPTER 12: HANGIN' OUT

I suffered for many years from neck tension. Meditation, relaxation, massage, Feldenkrais lessons, and many other therapies had helped intermittently, but the tension reappeared every morning. It showed up as I drifted out of sleep and typically camped out most of the day from the base of my head down into my shoulders. The price I had paid over the years was enormous. Not only did I experience persistent pain and discomfort, but the muscle constriction often crimped my ability to play tennis or paint a wall or even carry groceries. My many attempts to find a way to “relax” my neck had also cost me thousands of hours and dollars.

A few years ago, I decided to attend an all-day Essential Motion workshop led by Karen Roeper. I signed up mostly because of my thirst for the fun and freedom of creative movement, but I was aware that Karen had even more to offer. A longtime dancer, dance teacher, and student of the body, Karen had developed a reputation for helping people uncover and dissolve emotional blocks through heightened body awareness. By midday, I was feeling relaxed, playful, and refreshed. After lunch, Karen offered to do one-on-one somatic coaching. When she asked for volunteers, I decided to find out if she could help me free the tension in my neck. I raised my hand and walked up to stand beside her as the other thirty participants looked on. I was nervous yet excited.

Karen's calm, clear manner had gained my trust during the first half of the day. She had led us through a series of improvisational movement activities that provided a comfortable warm-up for the afternoon coaching. The first hour of the morning we stretched the ways that dancers do, gently coaxing every major muscle group, and some minor ones, into greater agility. Then, gradually, Karen prompted us to begin moving about the room, however we felt like moving, oblivious to others around us. There was no need to perform or please anyone but ourselves. At first I hesitated, stymied by intermittent flashbacks of a teenage ankle sprain from doing the Twist and being asked to

dance at school parties only by guys performing an act of charity. Yet Karen's gently reassuring instructions slowly slipped in past my memories of clumsiness. Soon, dreamy music prompted me to drift into a silvery state of consciousness, with no agenda but to let my body lead me. Little by little, I eased into exploring the pleasures of leaning, dipping, lunging, curling up, rolling, and resting. Other bodies moved around me in a mirage-like blur, and sometimes another person's way of leaping or bending or twirling piqued my interest. But mostly my attention was on my own body. I would watch and feel my one hand rising or my one knee bending, as if in slow motion. It felt like being two years old again, discovering what happens when you move this way or that.

At times, Karen played spicier music and guided us in moving bigger and faster, sometimes alone, sometimes joining our movements with others. I found myself in a spirited communion of dancing, weaving webs, shadowing the lifts and leaps of others, and then being followed and mirrored myself. The overall experience of the morning session was mesmerizing and exhilarating. I felt agile, free-flowing, energized.

The one-on-one coaching session began after lunch. After telling Karen briefly about my neck tension, she suggested I go ahead and feel the tension there fully. Intrigued, I complied. I stopped my usual effort to relax the muscles and simply observed the feeling in my neck. My shoulders rose and drew inward. My jaws tightened and my teeth clenched. I was startled and self-conscious about what was happening, but I was also curious. Karen reassured me: "Just stay with it. Trust your body."

I decided to close my eyes, paying closer attention and avoiding the distraction of thirty pairs of riveted eyes. The tightness moved down my torso, front and back. It kept intensifying. This seemed so odd. I wondered if this strange tension would take over and not leave me.

"Just stay with it. You're doing great, Pat."

I felt my chin dropping and my cheeks spreading wide into a grimace. The muscles in my forehead and around my eyes tightened. My body seemed ghoulishly disfigured, like a Dr. Jekyll or Dracula. What was happening felt out of my control, yet I also knew that I could reverse it if I wanted to. For now, I was drawn in, as if falling through a hole into Wonderland, and I offered no resistance

From my solar plexus upward, everything became tighter and more contorted. Tension descended into my arms, which rose behind me, the palms of my hand facing backward. The movement was so intense and extreme that I felt as if someone else had taken over my body parts, moving me like a muscled marionette, but from the inside, rather than with strings.

“Stay with it. Follow where it’s going.”

My shoulders pushed up toward my ears and my head dropped back toward my spine. My arms pressed harder backward, as if against a wall, while my upper torso pressed forward in opposition, yet the impetus for this intensity arose from within me. I was a pressure cooker, with insides pushing mightily against—nothing.

In this contorted state, I tried to explain to Karen what was happening, “It feels like I’m pushing, very hard. It’s very uncomfortable. It hurts!” I was straining as if my life depended on it. I hated this feeling yet felt at home with it. It was some terrible yet unnamed truth I had been living, that my body had been crying out about for a long time. My eyes were wet.

“What are you pushing?” she asked. Her question was so obvious, simple.

“Nothing,” I answered. A vast stillness followed. Almost at once, the accumulated pressure began to dissipate.

I stood there, quietly stunned, taking in fully the absurdity of what I’d been experiencing—pushing when there was nothing to be pushed. It was so familiar, this making of my life a struggle, everything taking enormous effort. I had lived that way for years—for all the years my neck had been complaining. Shopping for a new car when exhausted, on a below-zero day, rather than waiting for better conditions. Driving long hours on trips without stopping—having to “push on.” Trying endlessly to make a marriage work that just wouldn’t.

“Maybe there is nothing to push,” she responded quietly, echoing my words but amplifying their meaning. My whole musculature had already begun to register this very notion. The painful pushing sensations rapidly subsided. Tension dropped away. I felt myself standing taller. I was not pushing.

For a moment, I stood there, still, surprised. In a few minutes that seemed timeless, I had allowed myself to fully experience a range of feelings that my body had

been aching to reveal for a very long time. The tension that had nagged at me had had its full say, forcefully enough that I got the message, and it was no longer needed.

I opened my eyes and looked at Karen's smiling face. I told her about my tendency to push my way through life. At her suggestion, I said a few times, "There is nothing to push." With each repetition, that notion sunk in further. I felt lighter. I smiled bigger. Relief. Big relief. I was almost laughing.

"Now walk around and experience what 'nothing to push' feels like," she suggested. I tried to comply, but when I lifted my right leg to take a step, I felt off balance. I couldn't figure out how to move my leg or where it was going to land. This was a new body I was working with, one I hadn't experienced before in motion, one that wasn't tight and pushing. Everyone in the room could see how I was fumbling, and we all laughed together as I wobbled my way through new steps.

To my surprise, the biggest shift in my body was in my pelvic area. Everything below my waist was noodle-like. I began walking, but it was not walking as I had known it before. It was more like gliding, my whole body *easing* across the room. "I'm feeling like I'm just 'hangin' out," I said with a broad smile. "I've got hips!" I thought of young street-corner dudes with nowhere to go, whose whole bodies sway widely side to side as they move on down the street. No pushing, just *hangin' out*.

At this point, I was giddy. The whole group was laughing with me amidst breathy sounds of surprise.

After a while, I sat down, and it became the group's turn to mirror back to me what they had seen. They all stood and I watched as they tightened and contorted their arms and torsos the way I had done. Their faces showed mounting anguish as they took on the imprisoning tensions. Watching this multiplied mirroring in front of me, I was deeply moved by the pain. Compassion permeated my whole body—compassion for myself, for them, for all who experience self-torture born of fear. It flowed from my heart—my large heart—out of control. As I watched their fumbling attempts to walk newly as I had done, I smiled and cried and longed to help them the way I'd want to help an infant making her first steps. In these emotion-laden moments, I knew I could forgive a lifetime of missteps—my own and others.

They accumulate—these trips and falls—as we make attempts to get what we long for. Our psyches and our bodies bear the bruises. If we're hurt often and badly enough, they wisely conspire to protect us from further injury. They form and position themselves to avoid such dangers. It's a matter of survival.

My mother pushed. Not in a mean way mostly, but in her daily, insistent “hurry up and do what you're told right now” manner. With nine children to feed and bathe and keep out of danger (after losing two in infancy and having another nearly burned to death), she pushed to create order, compliance, safety and security. I learned from her to push too. *Life is hard. You have to work hard. You have to push to get what you need. An idle mind is a devil's workshop. Hurry up. Get moving...or else.*

After driving myself for decades by dutifully perfecting the skill of pushing, my body became weary and registered its protest. It could no longer bear the tension of this distorted intention, and it asked for mercy.

As I witnessed the group reflection of my experience, I felt drawn to redeem the innocent—myself and all humankind. What have we all done but try to make our way in the face of fearful autocrats who live around and within us? Even at age fifty or sixty or ninety, we're only trying to learn how to walk with ease through our world, to pick ourselves up if we fall down, and not to get hurt again. Compounding that are the years of distortions that our bodies cry out for us to notice. We try to be strong, look strong, and bear ourselves as nobly as we can. But we have bent shoulders, carved into submission from too much shame, or jaws tight and aching from—perhaps—anger unvoiced and unresolved. These and other signs of body anguish tell of a fragility often attributed to aging but more likely the result of living out misjudgments about our very nature.

I saw such de-formations in the family of bodies before me. While they acted out *my* pain, some of their *own* wounded ways of moving and holding themselves showed through. They no doubt had encountered errant rulings by their own parents and other punitive forces, and convinced themselves of what they must do to survive, to get along, to succeed.

Such wounds can fester for a long time before they emerge as pain, sickness, or disease serious enough to require a doctor's visit and perhaps lead to a life sentence of misery. This gathering provided an occasion to attend to them well before they got that

bad. Kindhearted attention allowed us to re-set our bodies so they could move with ease again.

When the mirroring process was finished and the group sat around me again, I felt a pervasive tenderness for each person. They had all accompanied me into my secret places. They had shown me that they understood. Every face smiled back at mine. For the next few minutes, we talked about what had happened. I remember most a comment from a man named Tom: “This morning you seemed like an interesting person to have an intellectual conversation with. Now you seem warmer, more approachable.” I imagine that’s because I had stopped pushing. I was just hangin’ out.

My experience in this workshop reminded me of Scamp, a dog that André had when he was young. Scamp was picked up by the city pound once when he left our yard. After he returned home, it was clear that something awful had happened to him while he was away. Scamp curled up in the corner of the yard and recoiled if I offered him food or called him to come play. Somebody had evidently treated him harshly, and now he couldn’t trust even those who had always treated him well. It took almost a week of frequent, gentle reassurances and gradually moving closer to him each day before his frolicky, fun spirit was revived and we could all romp with him again. It was a lesson in not pushing. Nothing could hurry his recovery from fear. Nurturing attention and reassurances of his innocence and safety restored his trust, but that happened only because this process was applied over a week.

After Karen’s workshop, I had hoped that my newfound feelings of looseness and freedom would become permanent. But as with Scamp, time and repetition have been necessary for this sense of ease take hold. I haven’t been able to rush it or push it, not after decades of well-trained self-constraint and contortion. But since that day with Karen, I have become more attentive to how my body feels as I go through my day. I try to be alert to what’s tight, what’s loose, and what wants to move, letting my body instruct me. And each Friday noon I gather with a small community of friends in a yoga studio for a weekly ritual of improvisation dancing. We give our bodies permission to move freely, to dance, to play. We savor the chance to let our bodies have their say.

Fear is possessive, settling deeply into the body. But it can yield in the presence of attentive, accepting kindness. Noticing—without judgment—where the body's movement or resistance seems to be, is a holy act. Within an ongoing practice of reverent attention, whether through meditative and creative movement or other mindful means, the body responds, encouraged to romp, or just hang out, until these pleasures become natural and body and spirit feel at home together.