Somatic Philosophy

A Reflection on Thomas Hanna’s work Bodies in Revolt: A Primer in Somatic Thinking

Sarah Hansen
10/16/2011
If we are to further transform ourselves and further transform our human environment, we must play, we must be powerful, we must be balanced and adaptive to the least winds of challenge and change. And, already, we are becoming refreshed with keen noses and sharp eyes and agile movements for the adaptational dance that we call life. Eventually we shall be happily startled to realize that the evolution-revolution is not a transient event which will someday be over as we settle into a new cultural routine; rather, evolution-revolution describes our future state of constant, fluid, never-ending adaptation which is the playful manner in which a technologized race finally learns to live. (Thomas Hanna p. 308)

Transforming ourselves into our fullest, most adaptive potential is an exquisite challenge. The challenge to find freedom for ourselves is a great one and the challenge to assist our family, community and culture to find playful, adaptive, balanced freedom is what Thomas Hanna aspires to assist with in our time and generation. It is a revolutionary concept that we must not take lightly.

In Bodies in Revolt, Thomas Hanna explores the influence of a number of scientists and philosophers that inform and shape his somatic philosophy of freedom that make us the “magnificent somas of an ancient and accomplished species (p103).” As a scientist and philosopher himself, he is passionate about understanding the “evolution-revolution.” I will briefly describe a major theme of each thinker and then return to the revolutionary significance of his work.

Charles Darwin informs our understanding of evolution and natural selection-- that we are a product of adaptations from the long history of our species and share involuntary responses with other species. As a somatic educator, Darwin helps us understand that those “who get along best in this world are those which are best able to cope with their world (p58).” He reminds us that we are living creatures linked with the animal kingdom, that “the kind of body we have and the kind of behavior of which we are capable are fundamentally the same: any given soma has a given guide-pattern of behavior, which is to say, of feeling, thinking and reacting as well as acting (p62).” Like all other creatures, we exhibit reflex patterns that, Hanna notes, other somatic scientists continue to develop, research and describe in further detail, such as Freud, Lorenz, Piaget and Reich.

Sigmund Freud helps somatic educators look at human beings as “an autonomous, needful organism which has evolved, struggled with and adapted to its environment through the long skein of biological history(p 70).” Hanna notes Freud’s view which contrasts pleasure, impractical and direct sensual satisfaction against displeasure, delayed satisfaction, practical and aggressive consciousness. As somatic educators we recognize these contrasts influencing our soma on a daily and life-long basis.

Konrad Lorenz and the ethnologists educate us on behaviors and remind us that our consciousness is only an element of our somatic self. The ethologists inform our understanding of the contrasting big drives of nutrition, hunger, mating and lust compared to flight, fear, anger and aggression. This work further illuminates the somatic educator on the reflex holding patterns we as humans carry.

Thomas Hanna presents Jean Piaget’s work on human adaption associated with accommodation to the environment and assimilation of the environment. As a developmental psychologist his work furthers our understanding of the developmental secrets of human intelligence, of consciousness and
conceptual thought. He helps the somatic educator understand that each individual is at a different stage of perception and cognition in how we view the world and ourselves in it.

Wilhelm Reich furthered concepts on patterns of muscular contraction of which Darwin and Freud had initiated. Reich notes that “the manner in which human beings repress themselves is through muscular contraction, and when this muscular contraction continues for a long period in a human’s life, it becomes habitual and gradually passes under the control of the autonomic nervous system (p126).” The autonomic nervous system unconsciously continues the work of muscles in the same way as it controls breathing, digestion and circulation. Reich brings us to look at the head and core of the body and provides us with the contrasts of the autonomic nervous system, the parasympathetic and the sympathetic. He furthers our understanding of dilatation (pleasure/anxiety) and constriction (diastole/systole). He reminds the somatic educator to move away from the fight and flight response of the sympathetic nervous system to the parasympathetic space of slowing the heart rate, softening the breath and quieting the mind ~ of removing our “muscular armor.”

Hanna begins his discussion of somatic philosophers with Immanuel Kant. Kant helps us “unriddle” human knowledge by changing the cultural lens to view how the world was perceived. He shifted the human world view from a lens focusing “out there” to a lens which is dynamic experiencing internal sensations. Hanna writes, “Before Kant there was only the world: sovereign, omnipotent and magnificent as it poured its light into insignificant little human cameras, so dependent and so empty inside. After Kant, the little black box was no longer empty and no longer in helpless dependency: the box was full, living and teeming with yet-to-be-explored structures, processes and possibilities. Immanuel Kant had discovered the human soma (p151-152).”

Soren Kierkegaard was an existential philosopher and phenomenologist. Thomas Hanna describes him as crucial to the development of somatology in both the technical and theoretical aspects of the discipline. Kierkegaard explored spheres of existence that bring balance and health to an individual in a challenging time period in human history. He saw the individual as self sensing, bringing meaning to one’s own life and bringing one closer to God as a living, acting, feeling human being. Today we are just short of two hundred years past Kierkegaard’s birthday and we continue to grapple with understanding “sensitivity training” and “expansion of consciousness.”

Hanna considers Karl Marx to be the “greatest social philosopher of the last century and a half (p177).” Marx interprets economic influences on societal divisions and structures. He teaches us that if we can move beyond labeling and classifying of struggles (such as between worker & capitalist or the haves & have nots), to a place of love and trust, than we will be able to move to a relaxed, non-aggressive community of human bodies.

Ernst Cassirer’s philosophical mission was to study the symbols of the evolution of culture and human consciousness. Through understanding the variety of sensory images of symbols in language and behavior, one can predict, perceive and understand ones culture. The scientific revolution is high speed at present, Cassirer reminds us to stay current with the cultural influences and human perception of our time. He asks us to notice the shifts in cultural symbols in order to
understand and live in our environment more effectively. He helps us recognize the need to evolve with and adapt to the symbolic shifts of our time.

Thomas Hanna describes Albert Camus as a “human soma in balance.” His life and work reflect the themes of equilibrium, proportion and balance – themes Camus felt were missing in society as a whole. Camus reflected on being human and the human potential to wholeness. He helps us to see the possibility of balance. Camus helped the culture to notice that “one didn’t need the blessings of the Greek gods in order to be a man, but one only needed, finally, to be a man in order to know the blessings of the gods.” (p195)

Maurice Merleau-Ponty was a phenomenologist that sought to understand human consciousness. He informs our understanding that consciousness is perception and perception is consciousness. He reminds us to link mind with body. He illuminates our understanding of focus on one shape verses using our peripheral vision to see and experience a larger field of view. He invites us to move from this restricted analytical unconscious perception to one of conscious perception– phenomenological consciousness. For the somatic educator this is about helping clients surrender to a full awareness, whole consciousness of the human sensory experience. It is about being consciously competent in our ability to sense, feel, notice and experience, critical elements for a somatic educator.

Friedrich Nietzsche is referred to as “the oracle of somatic thought” by Hanna (p209). Nietzsche looks at the “attainment of a new consciousness,” believing that people aren’t completely aware, perceptive or conscious (p32). Nietzsche helps us understand the adjustment that our somas are making in our technological age, shifting us to a new adaptational “normal” of balance in which we move fluidly in our new environment and gracefully with our individual somatic needs (p218).

Thomas Hanna recognizes that as a culture we are in search of freedom and for an “awakening of the human soma (p234).” I am reminded of a conversation in Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland where Caterpillar asks Alice, “Who are you?” And Alice replies, “I hardly know, sir, just at present –at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.” Hanna notes,

Somatic scientists and philosophers have taught us that, as somas descended from an immense evolutionary past, each of us is already “meaningfully” (read: adaptationally) structured in relation to our environing world. This meaningfully related structure is, quite literally, ourselves: it doesn’t need to be searched for or thought about, inasmuch as it already exists beneath all our searching and rational thinking (p234).

What we are looking for is within our self, just as it is in Alice. We are constantly changing, shifting and adapting as individuals and as a culture. The age old question of “Who am I?” is one worth staying current with and continuing to explore. As clinical somatic educators, we have a responsibility to notice the shifts, adapt to them and educate. To help one sense and feel the truth of who one is and how one senses in our ever changing technological society. We are partners and in a revolution helping to educate our own self and our culture on the mind and body connection. There is hope to find movement purely, freely, without pain and with a connection to all of the parts that
make us whole. We have a responsibility to offer freedom to ourselves and others so that we may live more completely. Thomas Hanna writes, “For the first time in human history we have the chance to discover what it actually means to live fully and openly as human beings (p31).” A revolution is in finding freedom and grace available right now.

In the final pages of Bodies in Revolt, Hanna discusses Einstein’s theory of Relativity $E=MC^2$ and compares it to $E=SA^2$. He says, “The energy within a human being is equal to the square of the amount of adaptability achieved by any given soma. This formula cannot exactly fit the human situation, inasmuch as the speed of light is a known constant but the amount of human adaptability is unlimited and inconstant.” As I read this, I can’t help but chuckle since a few weeks ago, researchers at CERN’s Large Hadron Supercollider in Geneva, Switzerland, announced they had clocked neutrinos moving faster than the speed of light (September, 2011). And that the MINOS lab in Soudan, MN, just down the road from my house, had published similar results in 2007 (then listed as unverifiable). As a child I learned that the speed of light was the fastest speed that matter could achieve in the universe. My daughter’s current 2011 science text book states the same thing, yet it is now out of date. $E=MC^2$ is no longer a “known constant” or a universal truth. We are in an “evolution-revolution.” Energy and adaptability are not constant in the universe or within my own body. As Thomas Hanna states “So, then, nothing finally is perfect. That, after all, is why it’s so much fun.” Freedom, a new dance, a new way of being is available to each and every one of us. It is unlimited, available in this moment, during this breath, but we must play, be adaptive and be balanced to find it.

New York Times, Sept 22, 2011, Tiny Neutrinos May Have Broken the Cosmic Speed Limit