

Body and Earth as One

Strengthening our connection to the natural source with ecosomatics.

BY SUSAN BAUER

The term *ecosomatic* opens an inspiring dialogue about the dynamic relationship between the earth and the living beings inhabiting it. As humans, we begin moving in the womb, and movement is a constant in our lives. Our bodies are our deepest connection to the earth and to humanity as a whole. We are each born of the body of another, live on the earth through a dynamic exchange with the environment, and return our bodies to the earth at our death. Through our bodies and our movement experiences, we learn about ourselves, each other, and our world.

Cultivating the capacity to be fully present—awake, attentive, and responsive to both our inner and outer worlds—can positively influence all aspects of our lives. The presence we develop from this type of responsiveness is as essential as the air we breathe. This type of embodied presence is developed by approaches to dance, movement, and bodywork that encourage somatic awareness—and that can potentially support a more ecologically conscious perspective as well. As dance educator Rebecca Enghauser

noted in the *Journal of Dance Education* (2007), there is a rich dialogue to be had among performers, choreographers, and practitioners of ecopsychology, ecology, dance movement therapy, somatic education, and dance education. Such a dialogue will “uncover new dimensions expressing what it means to be human in the most global and essential way. Acknowledgment of an ‘ecosomatic’ viewpoint may be the beginning of such a discourse.”

So what is *somatics*? The prefix “soma” refers to “the body experienced from within.” The term “somatics” was used by Thomas Hanna, who first distinguished between the “soma” and the “body,” to name a field of study developed in the early part of the twentieth century. Somatics refers to the whole person—physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual.

While traditional Western educational systems often encourage the proverbial “body/mind split” (placing the intellect above all else), somatics has evolved to heal this dichotomy. Although the term somatics refers to disciplines developed primarily

in Europe and the U.S., many somatic principles have roots in indigenous wisdom. In fact, many indigenous cultures have practices that, by today’s definitions, would be considered “somatic.”

Somatic education practices, often referred to as bodywork, body therapies, and movement re-patterning, represent a variety of body/mind approaches. Somatic methods teach us to become aware of, and learn to consciously re-pattern, habitual ways of moving—activating more of our own innate body/mind intelligence. This begins a process of self-inquiry and learning that empowers us toward more ongoing, sustainable self-care. Some somatic disciplines go even further to help us process any interrelated emotional or psychological aspects that arise. Overall, somatics takes a holistic and interdisciplinary approach, connecting body sciences, psychology, and movement, to help each person understand more about his or her body-mind.

To add the notion of ecology, or “eco,” begins to include an organism’s relationship to its environment. While somatics develops



GRAVITY: The dancers of Project Bandaloop explore the relationship between movement and gravity in their work that blends dance, ritual, and environmental awareness.

our kinesthetic and sensory perceptions, ecosomatics also includes the environment and one's awareness of and relationships with the outer world. Somatics allows us to say, here I am: this is how I move, how I feel in relation to my movement, what I am learning, what my questions are; ecosomatics supports us to locate ourselves within the whole: this is my place in my body, in the dance, in my daily life, in my community. Ecosomatics can also help us to reawaken to our interconnection with nature in a profound and personal way.

In retrospect, one of my deepest experiences of ecosomatics was in Bali, Indonesia, where I studied and performed with a contemporary Javanese movement artist, Suprpto Suryadarmo. Suprpto takes his training from nature and spiritual practice rather than from classical dance, and brings students into nature to explore the energies of the landscape through movement. Together we danced in outdoor temples, in forests, in rice fields, and at the ocean. As improvisers in his field of "art human nature," we learned to re-engage with

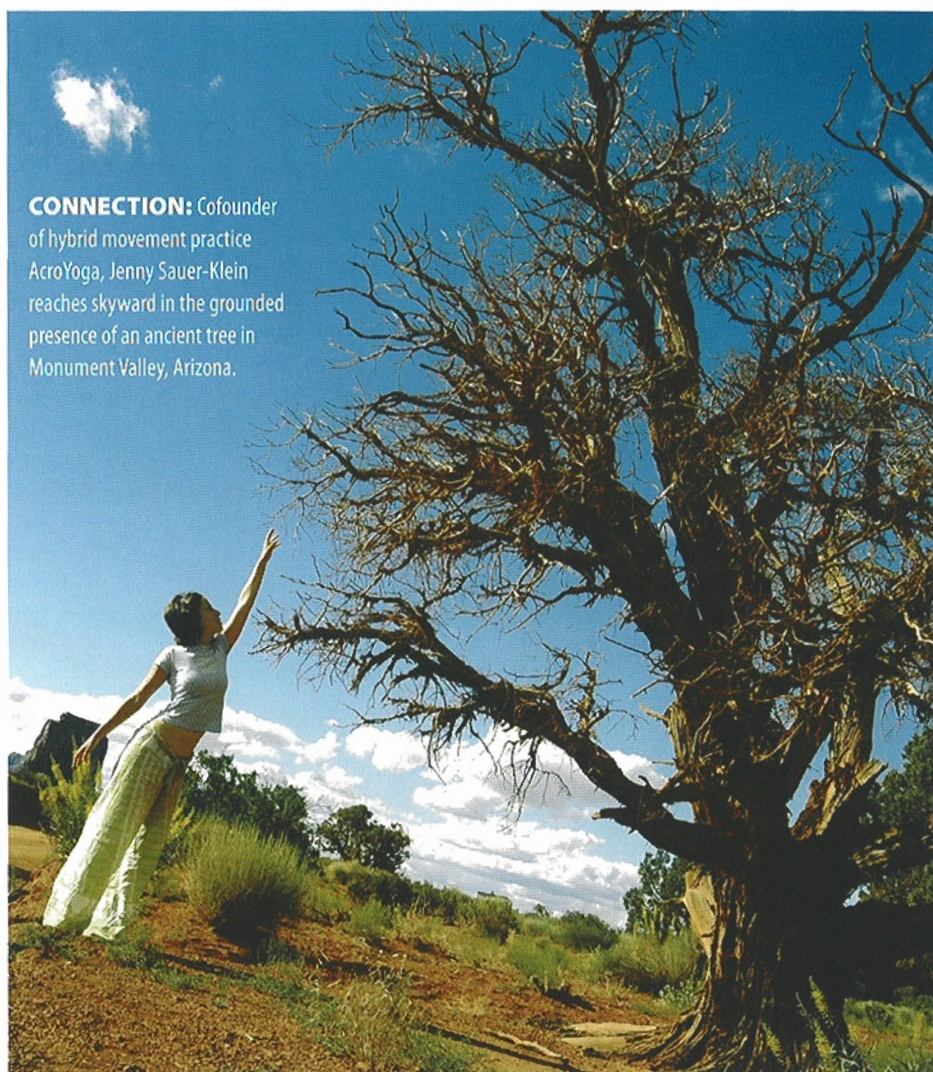
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nature through specific movement practices that taught us to become sensitive to our inner and outer landscape, and to respond creatively to our impressions.

As Andrea Olsen, author of *Body and Earth* (2002), says:

Our bodies know so much. It is our job to learn to listen ... We are part of, not separate from, the earth we inhabit. Our bones, breath, and blood are the minerals, air, and water around us—not separate but the same. This isn't metaphor, as I once thought; it is fact. We are part of a larger context, subject to the same physical laws as all other components of our universe. I find this comforting—to be part of something much larger than our individual selves. (Olsen, *A Moving Journal*, 2005)

Truly ecosomatic approaches intentionally ground our practices in the body by encouraging direct sensory perception of one's body as the natural environment. As we come to recognize that our very breath,



CONNECTION: Cofounder of hybrid movement practice AcroYoga, Jenny Sauer-Klein reaches skyward in the grounded presence of an ancient tree in Monument Valley, Arizona.

bones, and fluids are in fact parts of the natural world around us, we realize our deep interconnection with one another and are inspired toward creativity and heartfelt stewardship of our planet.

KEY FIGURES IN THE EVOLUTION OF SOMATIC MOVEMENT EDUCATION

F.M. Alexander: creator of the **Alexander Technique** (1890-1900).

Rudolf Steiner: founder of **eurythmy**, a system of harmonious body movement to the rhythm of spoken words (early twentieth century).

Margaret H'Douler: pioneering dance educator; established the first dance major in higher education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (1926).

Rudolf Laban: Austrian philosopher and choreographer who devised **labanotation**, a method of analyzing and recording movement using symbols (1928); also created **Laban Movement Analysis**.

Mabel E. Todd: founder of **Ideokinesis** and author of *The Thinking Body* (1937).

Dr. Ida Rolf: biochemist and researcher who developed **Rolfing**, a form of deep tissue massage to align the body structure to its correct posture (early 1950s).

Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais: creator of the **Feldenkrais Method** (late 1950s).

Emilie Conrad: developer of **Continuum**, an exploration of sound and movement (1967).

Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen: founder of The School for **Body-Mind Centering**® (1973).

Thomas Hanna: founder of **Hanna Somatics**; coined the term "somatics" (1976).

Irmgard Bartenieff: student of Rudolph Laban's who developed **Bartenieff Fundamentals**™, founding member of the Laban Institute of Movement Studies (1978).

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