Life as a Quest for Meaning: Organic Inquiry

Elisabeth Carrio

December, 2022

Table des matières

Traveling as an Embodied Practice 4
Ancestors and Youth Legacy 4
Cultural Diversity: Integrating the Difference 5
Creating Worlds as a Resilience Process 7
From Magic to Spirituality: Quest for Meaning 8
Discovering the World as an Embodied Practice 9
The Calling 10
Searching for Freedom when Prisoner of our Body 11
Feeling and Accepting the Difference 13
The Resilience Processes 16
Experiencing the Pain 16
Understanding and Facing Pain 17
The Process of Healing 19
Recognizing the Human Being's Dark Side 21
Fighting for Peace 22
Finding my Place in my Lineage 22
Intercorporeality: When the Body Warns You 24
Epilogue: What Did I Learn in my Journey? 26
Transcending Pain and Using it as a Lever 26
De-intellectualizing the Decision-Making Process 27
Rites of Passage 28

All human beings have had difficult or traumatic experiences at some point in their lives. For some religions, this is part of human beings' destiny since they were expelled from paradise after they disobeyed God and ate the fruits of the tree of knowledge or good or evil. Since that tragic moment, the individual must experience bodily suffering. But strangely enough, not everyone has the same capacity to cope with it. Some people are desperate, while others are more resilient. Viktor Frankl taught us that only by understanding the meaning of suffering can we overcome it. This is a position I share. In this essay, I will draw on my personal experience and my embodied practice of traveling to explore what mechanisms of resilience I put in place when facing traumas and how life's challenges can shape a life.

When I started this Ph.D. in Somatic psychology in September 2022, I never expected what will happen. I had no particular reason to go on to study at my age, but my curiosity drives me there. I was studying Transpersonal Psychology in the UK, and I was attracted by this psychological approach that mixed spirituality and neurosciences. I wanted to deepen my knowledge in this area, and I found on Internet an Institute in California, the CIIS[1]. I sent my application. It was accepted. After a few weeks of study,

[1] CIIS California Institute of Integral Studies

I felt that I should go there, to California. An inner voice kept telling me that I will finally find my community. So, I decided to leave the country in which I am a citizen, France. Some friends tried to discourage me, arguing that the imaginative flow dried up, the standard of living was too high, it was dirty, etc. Nevertheless, I was never able to resist the inner voice that repeatedly told me to go and see. This paper is about retrieving the red thread which conducted me there as a logical conclusion to a continuum of events and to my favorite bodily practice: traveling.

Traveling as an Embodied Practice

Traveling and discovering is an inheritance from my ancestors, but also from political circumstances and my personality.

Ancestors and Youth Legacy

It was the second time in my life that I decided to let everything behind me. I already did it twenty years ago. However, my family and I had a long history of exile, either voluntarily or imposed.

I was born the same year as a war, the Algerian war, on a territory colonized by the French in the 19th century. My family had settled there at the end of that century, coming from Spain, driven out by poverty. They responded to an advertisement that the French state had launched in Southern European countries because they wanted Europeans to populate these vast, newly, and almost virgin colonized territories. When they arrived in Algeria, communities were rebuilt perhaps by atavism, fear, or to feel

less isolated: the Spaniards, the Maltese, the Italians, and the French emigrants regrouped among themselves. If relations between the communities were calmed, intermarriage between communities remained rare. And so, the community traditions were perpetuated even though all the emigrants automatically had French nationality when they arrived in Algeria.

But we were in a colonized country. There was therefore a sub-population, the Arabs, the natives who were never spoken of and who did not have the same rights as the "French". They were never granted French nationality. Given the context and the low level of awareness of the political leaders of that time, war was inevitable. It broke out in 1954, six months after my birth.

I don't remember much about that time, which ended in 1962 with an exile to a country my family didn't know, France. But I realized recently that I had led my life from what I had learned during that time of my life: cultural diversity, the struggle for peace, and resilience. And this is this embodied learning that I would like to share to give hope to people who have to face the same challenges.

Cultural Diversity: Integrating the Difference

Diversity has always been part of my life as I was born in this cradle of cultural diversity which is the Mediterranean basin. Although Arabic people were considered a sub-population, our daily life was intertwined with theirs, we grew up together, going to the same schools and knowing each other's culture. People respected each other

while keeping their cultural identity, at least at my parents' social level. It was very deep in this culture that disappeared and was called "Pieds Noirs" ("Black Feets" because the French soldiers had black boots when they invaded Algeria). It is the reason why I am so familiar with Jewish, Arabic, and Christian rites and usages. Mediterranean history has been built on this diversity for thousands of years.

The history of my family explains also why I integrated the notion of diversity very early. Because he came from a poor family, my father lived in a popular district where Arabic, Jews, and non-originated French emigrants lived together. They shared the same foolish children's game; they went to school together; they fought together during the second world war; etc. The situation was the same on my mother's side. My mother was a teacher in a vocational school with a majority of Arabic students. As she enrolled me in the school where she taught, I went to school with Arabic people.

I remember also that our neighbor was Arabic, and invited my family very often, even during the war and even though they were not on the same side. This is how I discovered the existence of paradox in human beings as well as the limits of fighting for political ideas compared to individual feelings of friendship and mutual support. But this war was made of paradoxes. All the wars are. How to keep some humanity within destruction and death? What political ideas should be enough strong for killing a friend or a person you know? Politicians may destroy or displace populations because they do not know them. They know how to create a distancing between themselves and others,

who become abstract, bodies as objects that can be manipulated, destroyed, and displaced.

From this first part of my life, I also integrated the lesson on human diversity and difference. I had several opportunities to experience it much later in my professional life. But the seeds of what would be the main thread of my life were planted: Fighting for peace.

Creating Worlds as a Resilience Process

The period of settlement in France was not easy. We were not welcome, and it is only decades after, during my Ph.D. studies, that I discovered that we went through a traumatic situation. I kept some pictures from this period, and I cannot recognize myself in this little girl with sad and sometimes empty eyes. I was thin, and I became fat, a perfect example of "armoring' described by Reich. My parents were very protective but frightened or not available. So, I continued to practice an activity that I had started during the war: I used to take refuge in books and imaginative worlds. I remember that I was looking through the clerestory window of my bedroom at the pure and transparent night sky in Algeria. And I stared, fascinated, at these green, luminous, deadly traces that streaked this sky and were left by tracer bullets. The magic of the moment seized me while the child I was felt the fear and the hatred around me. It is one of my earliest memories and this moment is engraved in my body: the contemplation of beauty even in horror.

The books of Homer, the epics of Odysseus, and the tales and legends helped me to imagine my first journeys, far from the adults that I did not understand. They wanted me to go and play with the other children. But I preferred solitude and my dreams full of magic. My body kept this pattern. Except that the imaginative world was replaced by a spiritual crisis when I was ten.

From Magic to Spirituality: Quest for Meaning

I was eleven or twelve years old when I had this first and only mystical experience, an experience that was to leave a deep impression on me and opened the way to many years of research.

My parents were non-practicing Catholics. They never talked about religion or faith at home, and they had baptized none of their children. But I decided at the age of eleven that I wanted to be baptized according to the Catholic rites and make my communion. I had a firm intention: I wanted to become a nun since I was in elementary school. I remembered a childhood friend whose sisters had all joined the Order of Carmelites and I was fascinated. I must have been nine or ten years old. At that time, this path seemed obvious to me. My parents did not oppose my wish, thinking probably that it will be a good thing for my education and that if God existed, we might better be on good terms.

So, I received all the sacraments, from baptism to my solemn communion, in Corsica. The detail is important because Corsica is a land of tradition and most of the

girls were dressed in sumptuous dresses, inherited from their mothers and grandmothers. My mother had sewn me a beautiful dress of organza, entirely tailored-made. I can still see myself in that church, lit by huge candles, wrapped in incense, overwhelmed with ecstasy. And, suddenly, there, in a corner, I saw one of the little girls crying. Surprised, I asked my neighbor why; when we were amid happiness, why so much sorrow? She answered: "You know, she was raised by the sisters; she has no parents. She cries because her dress is yellowed and old. The sisters lent it to her".

I was dismayed. My world and my faith collapsed in front of this terrible injustice. How could God, a symbol of love and compassion, be so cruel to one of us on that very day? My dream of becoming a nun was shattered that day in that church. I left this God, revolting against the creator and not the creature. I realized later in my life on the wrong track that day, but adolescence rarely compromises.

Time passed, but since then, I have not stopped looking for the meaning of life, the answer to 'Why', searching in books for the significance of my lived experiences, feeling confusedly that, beyond "reality", there were other worlds, other rules than those of men, perhaps other destinies to accomplish.

Discovering the World as an Embodied Practice

I knew then a long period of stillness after my spiritual crisis. I went to school, got my first job, my first husband, my first and unique child, and my first divorce. I followed the rules, those of my parents and society. I was not happy or unhappy. I was

living in limbos until my father passed away. I was 41. Even if it took me time to accept his death, this was somehow liberating. A few months later, I sold my company and my belongings. I left for another city, and I started to search for a meaningful job. I wanted to work for an international organization or a NGO. It was not by chance.

The Calling

During the previous period, I traveled a lot either alone or with my daughter. One summer, I decided to volunteer for an association in Benin. I was teaching accounting and I can still feel the damp heat of the classrooms, the small pieces of chalk that we tried to save, and the worn-out books. I went there two consecutive summers, and an incident occurred in the second year. The IMF[2] asked the association to give courses to "deflated", a terrible word for unwanted civil servants. The IMF requested the African states to reduce their budgetary deficit if they wanted to continue receiving international aid. It was therefore necessary to reduce the number of civil servants. Since they could not be fired, they were offered a bonus of 10,000 CFA francs if they left voluntarily. Even if this amount seems derisory today, it represented a nice sum in Africa at this time. Some accepted. But the traditions in Africa and the importance of family ties wanted that the 'deflated' civil servants shared this lump sum with their

[2] International Monetary Fund

families. After a few months, nothing was left of the money received. The former civil servants lost their job, and above all their place in society, so some of them committed suicide. Faced with a large number of suicides, the FMI contacted the association to train them to become business managers. Or how to transform a cat into a tiger, as I called this training! I was shocked. How can anyone have such rigid dogmatic ideas? How can one be so ignorant of culture and traditions when one claims to improve the living conditions of this same culture? Something was wrong with this system. It was exactly after this experience that I decided to sell my belongings and find a job in the domain of aid development. I think that the death of my father allowed me to hear and answer this calling, which I did not allow myself before. My relationship with my father constructed me as a warrior. But I was a girl and as such, I was not allowed to show this aspect. My fate was to be married and have children. His death authorized me to become myself (Byrd-Craven,2012).

Searching for Freedom when Prisoner of our Body

It was also the period when my daughter left home to live her own life. I decided to liquidate my affairs to work for international organizations (the United Nations and European Commission) or NGOs. Fate decides that it would be for the former in the political arena.

In the beginning, I felt as if I was rediscovering my community. I worked with many nationalities, and people from all five continents. When we are employed by

these organizations, we are asked to go beyond our nationalistic affiliations to work for the common good. But this is not easy for everyone. I remember this Japanese Army General, a senior director, with whom I introduced myself on my arrival. I was working in The Hague at the time. I have rarely felt such pain or despair in someone. He explained to me, even though he did not know me, that he cannot understand the values of this Western world, and that he wanted to go back to Japan. I was faced with an exiled samurai, the archetype that Clint Eastwood captured perfectly in his film "Letters from Iwo Jima". He could neither accept nor integrate diversity. His world was unidimensional, and he was a prisoner of history, hence his despair. However, I recognize myself in this man and his dignity. I felt a deep respect for his sense of duty, a notion that seems old-fashioned in our western world. He represented the rigor, toward himself, toward the responsibilities which were given to him, but compassion was missing. I remember a very handsome man, very stiff. His body translated his thoughts.

I realized then that if belonging to a community may be protective and gives a sense of identity, it may also become a jail from which it is difficult to escape as the bars are in your mind. Plato taught us that our souls are locked in a cavern, i.e., that we are prisoners of our beliefs and also what makes our identity: the color of skin, nationality, gender, etc. As posited by Descartes in Discourse on Method (1637), “We were all children before we were men”. In my opinion, one of the roles of the school is to make the child aware of the limits imposed by culture, in other words, to teach how to

become conscious of self-imposed limitations and to assume freedom and the responsibilities that go with it (Johnson, 2012). According to Roger Kuhn, "Diversity also includes intersectionality and the reflection of one's positionality."

After all these years of traveling and searching for my place, I feel like a citizen of the world. Of course, I have a physical identity, a professional and personal history, and papers that indicate my nationality. All of this has shaped my behavior. But beyond that, I continue to look for what brings people together beyond their diversity while keeping my identity. To remain flexible, to transcend one's history for understanding the 'Other', and to find what is common at a global level rather than what separates are essential for me. And nationalities divide.

Feeling and Accepting the Difference

The difference is everywhere. However, as human beings, we are searching for integration into a group with which we can identify. At the same time, we are always confronted with differences: gender, language, and race…. I built up my identity and a sense of self-knowledge on the integration of differences. However, I think that a sequential approach is important: we need, first, to build a strong sense of whom we are as an individual, before searching for a community while keeping our individuality. Sometimes being different can help you as it helps me when being the only woman in a male environment in a foreign country: people look at you with curiosity, but they listen because they are intrigued.

One event particularly makes me aware of this.

I was on a mission in Congo - Brazzaville. I was recruited as a technical assistant in charge of capacity building of the civil servants from the Ministry of Planning. I had to make sure that they had the necessary level of expertise to manage the funds that the European Union was giving to the country to support their strategy of development. I was the only white woman working in the Ministry, but my colleagues did not make me feel the difference. After six months, I began to have trusting relationships with them.

I was living in a house surrounded by high walls like all white expatriates that I used to meet in the evenings and on weekends. One Sunday, I decided to visit on foot the town on my own. I know that it was unusual. The embassy, as always alarmist, warned us not to do it, not to be alone, and to drive. But I needed to get out of this house. So, I went through the high walls surrounding the property and after greeting the stunned guard in front of my house, I started to climb the tree-lined hill on which the house was built. I reach a place with a Catholic church. It was mass time and I arrived in the middle of it. The church was full. I sat in the back to listen to the sermon. At the end of the sermon, everyone hugged each other and wished for peace. I participated in the general warmth and embraced my neighbors on the right and left and shook some hands around. I felt a very beautiful moment of joy and sharing, even if this is often the case in Africa, a land of paradoxes, where joy and life force fight

almost daily with death. When mass was over, I continued my walk, but suddenly I realized the weight of stares upon me. People observed me as if I was a strange beast. I was a white woman among 'black' people, and I should not have been there. Few 'whites' came, except perhaps missionaries. And I knew that, for the Congolese, white people represent the devil, and that white is the color of death. Normally, 'whites' keep their distance and remain amongst themselves, protected by guards and walls so high that one wonders whether it is a protection or a prison. So, what was I doing here among the Africans? I then felt that social rules imposed me to face my bodily difference, although there was no aggression from the Africans, only curiosity. Perhaps this feeling came from the fact that just before I had experienced a moment of deep harmony and unity. I continued to walk but my heart was no longer in it. I understood that the body can become a prison when you are not in the place assigned by society. A feeling of loneliness overwhelmed me.

I did other missions in other countries and continents; during this period, I was always the 'foreigner', sometimes even when returning home because I had been away for too long, the different one, respected by my social status but placed at a distance. This resonated with what I experienced as an exiled parents' child. For a long time, I looked for communities in which I would no longer feel different. Eventually, I found them, but it was after a period of self-knowing and then self-acceptance. Then, it

requires no longer trying to please to be accepted and solitude becomes a haven of peace where you can face yourself.

Difference exists and from differences comes unity. People are like cells in a brain. Each one has a particular function and form, and it is because the cells are different that the brain can function. To find one's place in the world is to accept our differences and to put them at the service of the common good to achieve unity (in action, thought or heart, to quote Zoroaster).

The Resilience Processes

A key when deciding to discover either yourself or the world is to develop resilience. And one way to do it is to think that each experience is a life lesson. Suffering is an experience that all human beings share and the inevitability of this phenomenon has been studied by all religions and philosophies. For me, suffering is part of a quest for meaning. It is in this search for meaning that I was able to re-align myself after a difficult experience. It is part of my resilience system.

Experiencing the Pain

One of the experiences of suffering that most marked me was my second divorce. The pain was so intense that it caused an awakening and changed the course of my life.

We had been married for only one year when the situation worsened. When I met this man, I had just returned from this demanding mission in Congo. I was tired, and the one who will become my husband, after a few days of dating, showered me

with gifts and compliments that I wanted to believe in. He also told me that he needed me emotionally and… to manage his business. He asked me to marry him four months after we met. I accepted. Maybe I could have listened to my intuition before I made this commitment. I found out later that he was cheating on me, that he had stolen from his sick parents at the expense of his brothers and that he had paranoid tendencies.

The awakening was rough, especially since I had developed a belief since childhood that I was protected by the Gods and that nothing bad could happen to me. This belief was reinforced by the fact that I was rarely sick, and that I had never been treated badly, despite the missions I did in sometimes dangerous countries. When I realized his betrayal, my heart began to beat violently, my hands became sweaty. I could no longer think rationally. I was stunned. It took me a while to come back into my body. But while the body calmed down, the mind remained shocked, and my thoughts started to be obsessive. I kept thinking over and over about the situation, asking myself questions that would never be answered.

Understanding and Facing Pain

After a while, I decided to see a psychotherapist. She explained to me that my reaction was normal and that there was not much she could do for me because I was still living my life "normally". I was not depressed. I only have redundant thoughts, a consequence of the trauma (Lonergan et al.,2021). But I knew that this experience had

left an imprint on my body and in my soul. I could not stand to be touched anymore. I felt like my body had been soiled. It took a long time for this feeling to fade away.

My process of resilience led me to go back to school to study psychology and to understand what happened. As Holifield (2022) put it "Neuroscientific research indicates that interoceptive awareness – conscious awareness of the internal, bodily sensations underlying lived experience – enhances emotional discernment while facilitating affect regulation". Several months later, I realized that I wanted to believe what this man had told me, and what my father repeated to me when I was a child, i.e., that I was unique. I also realized that I had relived the trauma of my youth: the betrayal, political and familial, that my relatives had to face as if I wanted to have confirmation of this affective-motor schemata put in place at a very young age (Wehowsky,2015) and inherited from the lineage of the women in my family according to which no man is reliable.

I also became aware of how difficult it is to share the pain. We can understand and be touched by other people's pain, but we are alone in feeling it. Moreover, each person experiences it differently because of their history or personality. I also had to

recognize that evil exists and that no one is safe from it. Even the "character armor"[3] (Reich,1927) that I built when younger could not protect me.

The Process of Healing

At the same time, I had to face the loss of my only child. There have been many challenges in my life, but I think that it was the most difficult I had to face, namely the loss of my daughter's affection. This was one of my most dreadful life lessons.

It was towards the end of her medical studies that our relationship began to slowly deteriorate. Since she lived far away from me, I did not notice immediately her change of behavior towards me. But her phone calls were becoming increasingly rare. She was more and more distant. At the end of her medical studies, she gave birth to a boy. Of course, I asked to keep him from time to time. But I felt through her body language that she did not like this idea. When she finished her studies, she left for Switzerland with her husband to work and finish her specialization in psychiatry. From then on, I hardly saw her or my grandson. When I called or wrote to her, she simply did

[3] "Character armor" consists of many layers of defense reactions built up over time into a solid structure against the suppressed drives and any reactive hostility triggered by the suppression of the drives (Bunting, 2015)

not answer. The hardest part is that we never discussed the situation or the reasons for reproach; so, I never really understood the grounds for this rejection or her refusal to communicate. No word was ever exchanged on the subject despite my requests.

The wound was deep and lasted for a long time, I was not able to see how to bridge the gap between the wound and the healing, as Tayla Ealom, put it. How to accept this situation? Even if I had to face professional situations that were sometimes delicate, I had never felt such disarray and pain. Yet, I had to face it. A process of death and rebirth had to take place if I wanted to heal, and it is a long process. "Healing is the slow and gentle process of learning a new way of relating to that which causes us pain, fear, and suffering" (Ealom, 2018). I went through all the stages of mourning because that is what it was all about: mourning the lost years, mourning the wasted love, mourning the joy of sharing. I got angry; I rejected her myself. I rebelled. Then I managed to distance myself from the situation and retrieve internal stillness even if the pain is still there.

Neuroscience teaches us that our nervous system organizes itself into patterns under the effect of strong emotions. They awaken forgotten or participative memories (Fogel, 2004). The shock forced me to go inside myself, to explore the memory of betrayal and abandonment in my life. My interior was devastated. Because I belong to a culture that seeks rational answers, I looked for answers in academic or esoteric books. However, I found only calmness through meditation and walking in nature. I deeply

felt and still feel the restorative effect of nature. It is only recently that I have begun to connect with the animals and plants world. This has changed my view of humanness, his blindness, his need for destruction to exist or to possess, forgetting that death is never far and that they are only a link in the life chain, but also his need for love and tenderness. The fragility of the human species has never seemed so strong to me.

Recognizing the Human Being's Dark Side

Because it is also about pain and suffering, and even if not at the same level, my personal story resonated with an experience I had before. My desire to discover the world and its diversity leads me at some point to encounter evil. I had to deal with several cases of corruption within the international organizations in which I worked: public funds diversions, blackmail to earn more money, but corruption may take other forms than financial, and corruption of minds may go until genocides. I remember that, during a mission to Cambodia, I was listening to the broadcast of the trial of a Khmer Rouge former minister. His speech was of rare intelligence. He explained why he had come to decimate his people out of idealism because he believed in a better and more equal world. He apologized for his crimes and his 'intellectual' error. The discourse was clear and emotionally balanced. It was the perfect demonstration of idealism taken to the extreme, the so-called final solution, the destruction of thousands of bodies.

Evil is part of the diversity that we must accept and integrate even if it is difficult to understand. I went to Auschwitz to visit the death camps. The most striking

was the absence of bodies while all the luggage was there, just as if they will come back. I went also to Choeung Ek, the main execution camp of the Khmer Rouge in Phnom Penh. On the wall, the pictures of missed persons were pinned. All these eyes of unknown persons staring at me; their bodies tortured and killed because they were not born at the right time and the right place. History is full of these examples, especially the 20th century, the century of mass destruction because of scientific progress. How was it possible? What political ideas may justify genocide? Furthermore, the people who committed murders were educated. However, they cannot distinguish good from evil; political ideas make them lose moral judgments. I began to doubt then the benefits of an education that allowed people to reach a greater refinement in the destruction of others. Evil does not care about education. So, what are the roots of evil and the need for the destruction of human beings?

Fighting for Peace

Finding my Place in my Lineage

I became aware that we all have terrible power, a reservoir full of energy. This energy is neutral. It circulates in our body and our mind. What to do with this energy depends on our consciousness or our ethical choices. And we have both, good and evil, within us. Because I was born and raised in wartime, I chose to work for peace. Even if sometimes, I felt discouraged, it was evidence for me. However, I did not realize at the beginning that I was engaged in a real fight.

My parents were fighters, each of them having a different style. My father participated in WWII, then in the Algerian war. My grandfather participated in WWI and regretted not having been able to participate in the Spanish war against Franco. Before my ancestors participated in different wars (1870…) and exiles, men and women, directly or not. As I was curious, I made a DNA analysis. Even if I have French nationality, I have Spanish blood in my vein, but also Italian, British and German. My ancestors lived in all these European countries which were at war for centuries. As Murakawa (2018) notices, I inherited this violence, even if I became aware of this very late. I realized also that this violence is an energy that can be used. I decided to put it at the service of the peace.

I became conscious of the inheritance of my lineage during my last experience with psilocybin. I crossed what Bache (2019) called the 'Ocean of Pain'. I saw my ancestors killed and being killed and I released this pain and suffering. I saw the heart of the earth beating. I was a mother losing her child. During the collective meeting that took place after this experience, I felt the necessity to apologize for what my ancestors did. As posited by Tayla Ealom (2018), "there is a wound that has been passed down through the generations of people that have had to live in a certain way to allow my life to take shape…" (Ealom, p.139). My apologies were "an attempt at offering backward to my ancestors the healing that they could not engage as they battled to navigate the

continuous wounding" (Ealom, p.148). During the following psilocybin journey, I was able to feel pure transcendent love.

I think that it is important to acknowledge this violence within each of us, this ability to destruct and to create, but, perhaps more importantly, we have to be aware of the choices we have about how to use our energy. The concept of energy to which I am referring encompasses both an objective and scientifically measurable aspect and a subjective aspect, known as vitality, where "the subjective perception of life force is based not merely on physical health, but more so on the experience of a coherent self as the source of motivation, autonomy, self-realization, and personal well-being" (Wehowsky,2015)

Intercorporeality: When the Body Warns You

I inherited from my lineage what Behnke (2003) describes beautifully in her paper as "sedimented patterns of bodily comportment" such as fighting, but it is not enough if a fight for peace has to be conducted. The body must be trusted, and the bodily signals listened to, especially when we meet people. There were moments in my professional life during which this concept of intercorporeality helped me to understand situations and kept me safe.

I was on a mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo, after the end of one of the multiple conflicts that the country has endured. I was working for an international organization, and I discovered that some African senior managers asked for money

from the drivers so that the latter can be recruited. The drivers whose salaries were extremely low were blackmailed by their people, in an organization whose mandate is to fight for peace and equality. I asked for a meeting with the Senior management. I did not know the names of the corrupt persons and I intended to report the situation and request an investigation. When I stepped into the room, the hairs on my arms bristled. My body warned me of danger. Intellectually, I was surprised. What could happen to me in my position? Why does my body react as such? However, I could still feel the danger. I remember that in the room, one of the senior managers, a Senegalese woman was sitting, covered with golden jewels. Despite my amazing bodily reaction, I succeeded to master my emotions; however, all my senses were on alert. I explained the situation to these managers. I cannot remember the whole scene, but this day, I decided to follow my felt sense of danger and quit. I have never felt again so strongly this bodily sensation of danger since that day. I only saw animals reacting like this, but it was clear to me that my body captured some hidden information. Gendlin explains to us that

> *The body does not first exist and only then interact. Rather, its growth and life processes consist of environmental interaction… Our bodies sense themselves in living in our situations. Our bodies do our living. Our bodies are in interaction in the environment; they interact as bodies, not just through what comes with the five senses…. The body senses the whole situation, and it urges, it implicitly shapes our next action. It senses itself living in its whole context—the situation.*

> For Merleau-Ponty, *the body, sensing from inside, is an internal-external orienting center of perception, not just perceived, but perceiving*. (Gendlin, 1992).

And this ability to perceive or felt sense is essential. As noticed, by Gendlin, it is difficult to describe this intuition. But we possess a situational body that receives information from the environment at a subtle level. Verbal communication is not necessary; our body feels and knows without a word.

Epilogue: What Did I Learn in my Journey?

Transcending Pain and Using it as a Lever

My story is one of identity construction. I have to discover myself and then find my place in my lineage, acknowledging the energy that was transmitted but becoming aware that this energy should be used differently. I learned to lose and to learn from my failure. After each obstacle, a balance has been retrieved, but at another level of consciousness or understanding. I always tried to search for the meaning of the situations that I faced. I was supported by my childhood faith in a divine connection and then by meditative practices that helped me to find internal peace. I always considered that I was at the service of something bigger. I was conducted by an internal voice, an intuition that I transformed into action. My experiences helped me not only to be more grounded in my body, but my embodied mind became more vigilant to intuition and sensations. To retrieve stillness after challenges, I put in place bodily practices such as dancing, walking in nature, painting in addition to meditation. They

help me to escape from the hustle and bustle of the outside world and return to my inner world, peace, and calm. They also help me to listen to my intuition, this inner voice before deciding. I learned that inspiration precedes expression. "Often it takes a slightly unusual circumstance to disturb our metaphysical distance from the corporeal world" (Abram,1988).

De-intellectualizing the Decision-Making Process

It takes time to des-intellectualize the process of retrieving oneself and the connection to the body and nature, to live the merger between the visible and the invisible as Merleau-Ponty described it, to explore this exchange between our body and the world looking for meaning so that we may escape from the nihilism described by Nietzsche. As Johnson put it, I "feel a primal disconnection between thought and experience" (Jonhson, 1997). However, this does not prevent this inner voice to speak, and the more I became grounded and self-confident through my experiences, the louder the voice. My felt sense grew up until becoming equal to the reason when taking decisions. The process is always the same: An idea emerges, my mind analyzes it, and then I bracket my thoughts. I "stay with feelings before any concrete contents or images, words, symbols emerge." Then I know what to do. The process is not sequential but iterative and alchemical. At one point, my body knows, at a cellular level. Murakawa calls this flow 'experiencing'.

Rites of Passage

I have experienced several rites of passage. These rites are ontological. Even if they are not any more embedded in formal rituals, they are still existing. As Holifield (2022) put it, "the Self devises them. It offers an opportunity to enlarge the narrowed perception of our waking ego-self toward a fuller sense of meaning and purpose. As in all rites of passage, the initiate (us) neither recognizes themselves as they are, nor do they know who they are to become. In this state of liminality, transformative processes are at work. "

The purpose is "finding peace or creating balance within the self and with the inspired beings' surroundings. It is a gesture, it is a movement, it is a dance, it is stillness, it is a repetitive action or word, it is art, it is music, it is birth, it is death, it is a divine connection, and it is choice" (Zelaya, 2018). I went through different initiation processes, on every journey or mission, on every spiritual commitment. It was not a linear process. My identity was built up as a river that grows up each time a smaller river flows into it: the war, the exile, books as support of imagination, the mystical crisis, the acceptance of social rules, and then the calling, again, the missions, the spiritual and psychological studies, until the third calling, the one I am living here and now. Each event is imprinted in my body. It was a lonely journey towards independence and self-knowledge, but also social change through my fight against corruption. I explored what Kuhn called the triple Ps: power, positionality, and

privilege. I always was conscious of my power, socially legitimated by my nationality and my diplomas. I used this power against corruption. My privilege was to be born in diversified and ancient culture. Power and privileges influenced my positionality as a European and white woman and my responsibilities. I had the means to explore myself and the world but also the responsibility to act ethically. When I was a child, I wanted to be a missionary and I became a pilgrim (Johnson, 2012).

References

Abram, D. (1988). Merleau-Ponty and the Voice of the Earth. *Environmental ethics*, *10*(2), 101-120.

Bache, C. M. (2019). *LSD and the mind of the universe: Diamonds from heaven*. Simon and Schuster.

Behnke, E. (2003). Embodiment work for the victims of violation: In solidarity with the community of the shaken. *Essays in celebration of the founding of phenomenological organisations*, 1-14.

Büntig, W. E., The work of Wilhelm Reich, Part 1: Reich, Freud, and character (pp. 47-61). Marlock, G. & Weiss, H. (2015). The handbook of body psychotherapy & somatic psychology. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books.

Byrd-Craven, J., Auer, B. J., Granger, D. A., & Massey, A. R. (2012). The father-daughter dance: The relationship between father-daughter relationship quality and daughters' stress response. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *26*(1), 87.

Ealom, T., the Gap: Social Wounds and Personal Transformation. In Don Hanlon Johnson. (2018). *Diverse Bodies, Diverse Practices : Toward an Inclusive Somatics*. North Atlantic Books. P.p.121-150.

Gendlin, E. T. (1992). The primacy of the body, not the primacy of perception. *Man and world*, *25*(3-4), 341-353.

Holifield, B. (2015). Psyche within the matrix of the natural world: weaving the inner and outer. Journal of Analytical Psychology, Nov 2022, 67, 5. John Wiley & Sons Ltd. DOI: 10.1111/1468-5922.12874.

Haruhiko Murakawa, "The Void of Experienced Meaning in Japanese Society: Ambivalent Attitudes toward Body Practices," In Don Hanlon Johnson. (2018). *Diverse Bodies, Diverse Practices : Toward an Inclusive Somatics*. North Atlantic Books.P.p.199-220.

Johnson, D. H. (2012). Transformative body practices and social change: The intersection between spirituality and activism. *Integral Review*, *8*(01), 35-42.

Kuhn, R.J., Fieldwork: Seeking Balance. In Don Hanlon Johnson. (2018). *Diverse Bodies, Diverse Practices : Toward an Inclusive Somatics*. North Atlantic Books.P.p.21-44.

Lonergan, M., Brunet, A., Rivest-Beauregard, M., & Groleau, D. (2021). Is romantic partner betrayal a form of traumatic experience? A qualitative study. *Stress and Health*, *37*(1), 19-31.

Murakawa, H, The Void of Experienced Meaning in Japanese Society. In Don Hanlon Johnson. (2018). *Diverse Bodies, Diverse Practices : Toward an Inclusive Somatics*. North Atlantic Books.P.p.199-220

Reich, W. (1970). *The mass psychology of fascism*. Macmillan.

Shapiro, H. S. (Ed.). (2009). The Cultivation of Children's Bodies Towards Intricate Thinking and Sensitive Behavior. In *Education and hope in troubled times: visions of change for our children's world*. Routledge (Chap.12).

Zelaya, A.N., Multiple Paths: Intersectional Pneumosomatic Approaches to Mental Health. In Don Hanlon Johnson. (2018). *Diverse Bodies, Diverse Practices : Toward an Inclusive Somatics*. North Atlantic Books.P.p.45-70.

Wehowsky, A. (2015). Affective-motor schemata (pp. 322-331). In Marlock, G. & Weiss, H. The handbook of body psychotherapy & somatic psychology. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books.