

## My First Encounter with Somatic Therapy: *De-mystifying Somatic Experiencing® Sessions*

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### Somatic means “of the body.”

*I offer you my story to de-mystify somatic therapy. However, it is NOT meant to convey that there is a typical Somatic Experiencing® session.*

**A minor auto accident in 2003 changed my life** both personally and professionally as a trauma therapist. The accident was low-impact and did not cause any injury. I had been in a few other fender-benders before and this one seemed no more significant by any measure. And yet, for days following the event, I felt afraid to drive. Even though the fear was never intense enough to actually prevent me from driving, it was odd because I had never felt this way following any other accidents. I vaguely attributed the fear to a more immediate sense of mortality “now that I [was] in my middle age” and went about my life.

Then one day, I mentioned this experience to Peter, my Tai Chi teacher in Vermont, where I was living at that time. He invited me to try this thing, **Somatic Experiencing®**, with him. Peter was a student of life and knew a lot of interesting things such as Tai Chi, Qigong, Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais Method, various schools of martial arts, and yoga. I immediately said yes.

**At the onset of my first Somatic Experiencing® (SE) session, I felt a little disoriented by Peter’s instruction to sense and track my body’s sensations instead of telling him what had happened in the accident.** But, my curiosity for new experiences won over the urge to tell, and sure enough, interesting things started to unfold. For instance, my mind’s attention kept returning to an area of my leg. There was no sensation to speak of. But the area felt “present” for no apparent reason. When Peter wondered out loud that the area might correspond to a section of the Meridians (see note) related to compassion, I felt a squeeze in my chest and remembered what I had been doing on the day of the accident.



Good Neighbor Health Clinic in White River Junction, VT, drawn by Mimi Murray-Eastman

The accident happened on my way home from my first day of volunteering as a receptionist at a free medical clinic for the under- and un-insured. Throughout my shift, I took calls from people who were experiencing pain, fear, confusion, and humiliation from not having access to medical care. As I was driving home, I was in a state of daze and tension from holding back and holding in my tears, indignation, and helplessness for those people’s suffering. Peter guided me to slow down the surge of sensations in my chest and to shift my attention between those sensations and the “imaginary opposite.” He asked me to imagine an alternate reality even if it was unrealistic. What popped up in my mind was the image of the entire human-

ity taking a collective exhale, through which the toxins in our bodies – physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual - got released. He explained that, even though the scenario was not likely to come true in reality, its impact on my mind-body was real. Indeed, as I held the image of people all over the world exhaling in unison, I felt my hands tingling to release the tension, my body relaxing throughout, and my chest opening and becoming spacious inside.

**By the end of the session, the overwhelming quality of the sadness and indignation was gone. The hopelessness about the unjust conditions in our society was replaced with a renewed commitment to keeping up my part in doing the right thing. I no longer felt afraid to drive.**

Shortly thereafter, I signed up for the professional training in SE. A year later, in another SE session, the memory of the accident came up spontaneously and I uncovered the link between the accident and my childhood trauma, which was the cause of my seemingly inexplicable fear of driving.

### ***How Does Somatic Experiencing® Work?***

Somatic Experiencing® (SE) is neither a quick fix nor a cure-all. I often describe **SE as a process of (re-)learning life skills for self-regulation of the nervous system in collaboration.** The collaboration happens between the client and the practitioner, and also, between the client's mind, body('s nervous system), heart and spirit. Here, I can explain some of the SE principles used in my first SE session to facilitate the self-regulation of my nervous system:

*"I felt a little disoriented by Peter's instruction to sense and track my body's sensations instead of telling him what had happened in the accident."*: Physical sensations are the language of the body and the gateway to the workings of the nervous system. This is why Peter asked me to focus my attention on my physical sensations rather than the story of what happened, which is the language of the mind. Another reason why Peter steered me away from story-telling is our understanding in SE that tracing a traumatic experience verbally in a chronological order (e.g., "This happened, and then, that happened...") makes the nervous system think the event is happening all over again. This is a common way by which we get re-traumatized.

*"..slow down the surge of sensations in my chest.."*: Slowing down the sensations minimizes the possibility of "too much happening too fast," which is another common cause for re-traumatization. In SE, we call this "titration"; I refer to this principle as "a little bit at a time."

*"the imaginary opposite"*: The opposite of a distressing physical sensation, emotion, image or thought provides a counter-point to the activated and stressed state of the nervous system. Zooming in on the distress and maintaining our attention on it only causes more stress in the nervous system (e.g., contraction, agitation, panic, etc.) and does not allow the release to occur. Imagining the opposite is one of the effective techniques in SE to create a counter-point necessary for the healing process.

*"..shift my attention between those sensations and the 'imaginary opposite'"*: Trauma results from our body's nervous system being stuck in the survival stage (e.g., fight, flight, freeze or dissociation) of the stress response cycle. Shifting our mind's attention between the stressed state and its counter-point allows this stuckness of the nervous system to loosen. I refer to this principle as "moving back and forth" - "pendulation" in SE terminology.

### ***For More Information:***

I welcome your inquires about my service and other documents that explain SE in more depth. I can be reached at 651-319-2110 and lee.theam@gmail.com. I look forward to connecting with you soon!

Note: The Meridians I refer to in this essay are a part of the conceptual anatomy in the Traditional Chinese Medicine. The Meridians are channels that run throughout the human body and are the conduit for the life energy, "qi."