



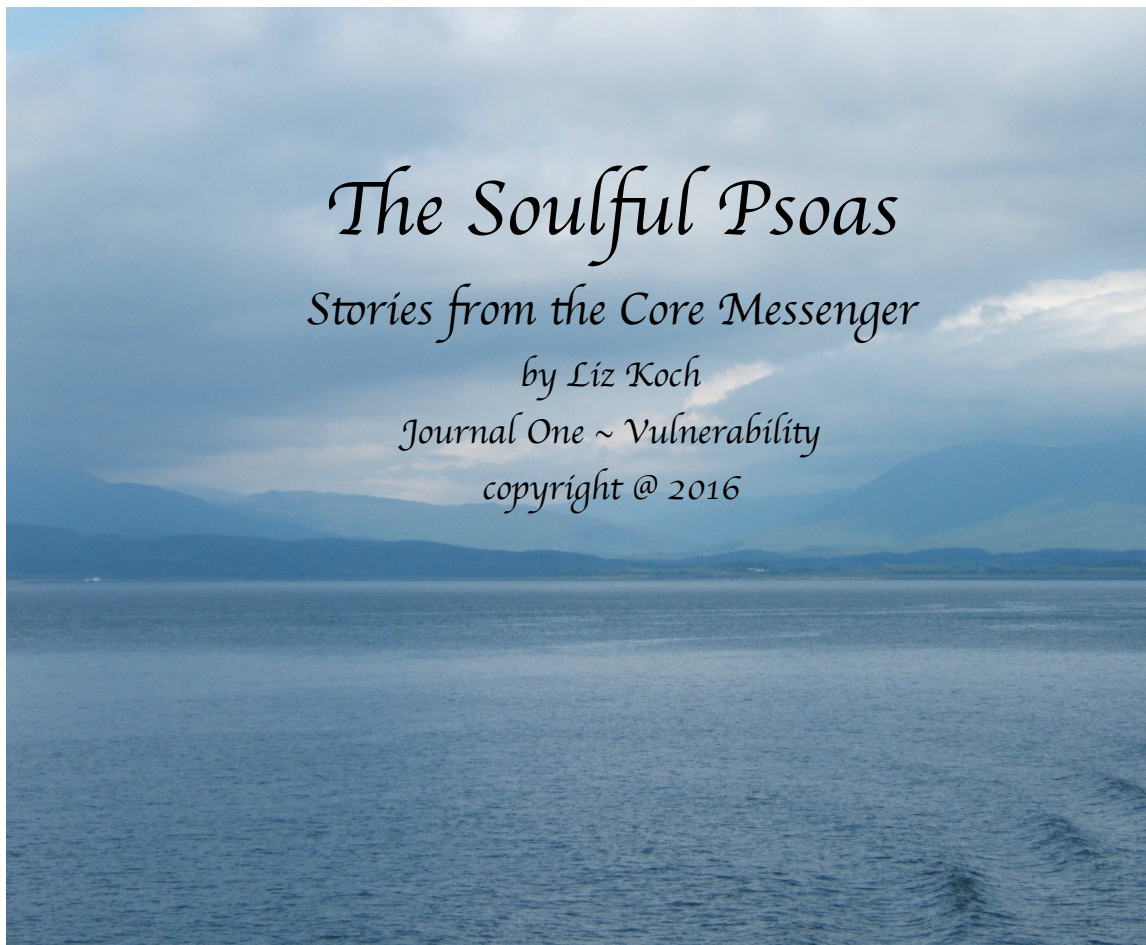
The Soulful Psoas

Stories from the Core Messenger

by Liz Koch

Journal One ~ Vulnerability

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Powerful, soulful stories emanate from the Psoas centered deep within every human being. Emerging from the central axis, this bio-intelligent tissue has an intimate relationship with bone and is subject to the water element. In oriental philosophy, it is the element of water that brings life and is the very essence of our being. Known as *jing* this primordial force animates all life. Consciously turning towards our fluid core psoas therefore provides a direct portal to our bio-intelligent wisdom.

The psoas speaks to the very heart of our existence as a human being. That is, our personal journey thus far and the profound longing and feelings we have about showing up and fulfilling our destiny. These stories then tell a tale of personal experiences here on the earthly plane of existence.

In order to support the bio-intelligent psoas, a practitioner can develop their awareness not only to their own psoas, but also they can develop their awareness for holding space for their client. By doing so, the psoas reveal its mystery into hands willing and capable of bearing witness to another person's core experience. These hands need to hold space without attempting to pry or heal. Kind, curious hands simply willing to allow a story to unfold. Hands open with no hidden agenda but to be present to each moment. What mysterious stories the psoas reveals to hands willing to listen!

For more than 40 years I've held my hands open for the psoas to tell its tale. I have come to call the psoas *the messenger of the midline* not only because of its physical location, which emerges directly from the central axis of the human core, but also because of the powerful story that exists within each and every human being. I believe these messages hold the medicine necessary for each person to become healthy, happy, and truly creative. The psoas however, as messenger, is very energetically sensitive and offers a path only to those willing to follow; a truth teller so to speak, of earthly matters held in flesh resonating essential pertinent information. Like the precious newborn or a wizened sage, the psoas, as messenger, is honest asking nothing more than to be received so that balance and integrity may be restored.

Having been privileged to hear these messages has essentially allowed me to support a person's unique core integrity. It is an honor to be witness to another being's inner life with all its vulnerabilities, strengths, and deep-felt expressions. This has inspired in me a desire to be very respectful towards my clients and their process. The psoas essentially tells a very personal story revealing our integrity and our compromises, and whether or not we are now nourished or depleted from our personal coping strategies. Exploring the psoas in this non-manipulative,

non-invasive approach helps to awaken not only my creativity but also their innate creativity so that they feel nourished, empowered and simultaneously curious. From a nourished curious orientation a person can best express their abilities, discover new ways of being and therefore be effective in changing their world. Like a flower blossoming, I imagine it feels good from deep within and this brings joy to everyone without.

By sharing these stories I hope to offer you, the practitioner, teacher and therapist a window into the felt sensed, unresolved dynamics found within the human core. Each story offers not only insight into the dynamic itself as a symptom but also presents a creative solution challenging each of us to be creative in our approach to helping others.

No amount of stretching, trigger- pointing, or manipulation can ever make a flower fully blossom. The healthy psoas is like a flowering blossom needs support and nourishment not a fix. By sharing these stories I hope to challenge you to recognize that restoring balance for each and every one of us, always begins from being nourished and safe within.

IMPORTANT NOTE: This journal is not intended as a substitute for the medical advice of physicians. The reader should regularly consult a physician in matters relating to his/her health and particularly with respect to any symptoms that may require diagnosis or medical attention. All names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

Vulnerability

Invited to teach at a pain clinic, I went to San Francisco thinking I would be presenting the basic principles of the psoas to a group of men. Because the group was small, I had the opportunity to work with each individual and discover what support I could offer. Jim was a thin, tall man who was struggling with pelvic pain. Looking back (over 30 years ago) I now recognize this undernourished man was possibly struggling with what is currently labeled as an eating disorder. I recognize now just how depleted his organs and connective tissue must have been. While supporting his legs in the falling and catching exploration, I sensed a deep distrust from within his core; a sense that something was about to happen and an even deeper fear and panic welling up within him. By holding space and following whatever cues his psoas revealed, I suggested he keep his eyes open yet soft without trying to focus on anything in particular. I simply recommended that he take in the light within the room. But Jim kept his eyes tightly shut. I had a distinct sense that his father had been a major player in his youth and in his current pain. I was pretty sure that for Jim this man was gruff, scary, and physically invasive. I sensed that Jim's fear and distrust had something to do with this overbearing father and the terror of his dominant presence. After we worked awhile, I asked Jim if there was something his dad did that really scared him, something overbearing. With a resounding yes, he told me that his father would hold him down and force him to eat by shoving food into his mouth. I asked Jim if he would like to try exploring the vulnerability of letting his legs drop into my hands so he could feel my support with his eyes open. This would enable him to see I was not his father and that he could also benefit from staying present in this moment by noticing the lights, shapes, and colors in the room. He allowed his eyes to be softly open as we worked a bit longer. This time, with eyes soft and open, he was able to take charge of how much weight he gave up and realized he had the power to explore his choice to give up the weight of his legs only when it felt like inner control. I had no agenda; I had no need to prove I was right. This offered Jim the opportunity to tune into the difference between holding and letting go, being held, and feeling supported without fear of losing core integrity. After rolling to his side and standing up, Jim reported feeling more grounded with a firm sense of each foot on the floor. Jim felt he could now stand on his own two feet. Standing grounded allows the pelvic basin the ability to locate in gravity free and balanced that brings a sense of deep support from within.

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Janet appeared in my office as a strong, competent woman who told me clearly that she was frustrated by a mysterious pain which had recently started while having sexual intercourse with a new lover. Janet revealed she had met a man she really loved. She felt she had finally found a lover she was excited to sexually explore with. Yet all of a sudden she was experiencing pain during intercourse. She was very upset, expressing the unfairness of her situation. How could this be? Janet was of pre-menopausal age, so it would be easy to assume that vaginal dryness might be causing her discomfort. But Janet told me she had already consulted her gynecologist and felt certain there was something else causing her pain. She came to me because she believed it had to do with fear and that it was connected to her psoas. As I

supported her legs in the falling and catching exploration, I felt a power and strength within her whole system. I could sense a strong warding off expression. It felt as if her whole being was stuck in a primal startle response.

After working together I explained to Janet what I understand about this warding off response and asked her what she did in her everyday life. How did she spend her time? Janet explained that she was an avid skydiver. She told me she had started over 20 years ago and that skydiving was so compelling for her that she spent hours in the air. It was an "Aha" moment for both of us. Jumping from a plane ignites the fetal curl, so skydivers have to override this key instinctive response by arcing their spine, what I call, the warding off expression. Janet had spent hours, and in fact years, in this position. Her nervous system was accustomed to a sympathetic rhythm and her tissue had a holding pattern associated with the resistance of falling. How fascinating it was for both of us as we dialoged about "falling in love"; the ability to yield, to give oneself, to feel open; and to be responsive to another person. To be fully taken during lovemaking entails a deep level of surrender. We talked about the difference between "fucking" and "lovemaking." Lovemaking is a slow, parasympathetic play...an explorative play with nothing to achieve and no accomplishment necessary. The very antithesis of what Janet had spent the past 20 years doing.

I showed Janet how I work with the fetal curl to access my vulnerability and nourish my parasympathetic response. We also used a soft inflatable ball placed behind her heart area as a tool for hydrating stuck tissue. The idea of softening her midline was the focus so she could gain a new sense of balance. Using the partially deflated ball placed under the back of her heart, Janet could yield into the ground through giving up her weight to the ball and explore her sense of letting go. Using this tool for encouraging surrender allowed Janet to consciously give herself (through her weight) to the ball and eventually, I hope, to her love life. Feeling the safety of landing into what might be thought of as "the hammock of life," Janet could open her tight, defended back muscles and thus energetically soften the back of her heart. Doing so gave Janet a sense of expanding into the backfield of her being. As Janet became familiar with opening the back of her heart area both muscularly and symbolically, she told me how every fiber of her being seemed to be resisting the exploration. She felt stirred with a feeling of terror. Was there more to understand and explore? I asked her why skydiving was so satisfying. Janet realized she could conquer her vulnerability and feel her power when she skydived. We both agreed that this realization was a rich territory of exploration for her to take home and to explore further. Janet's body awareness, specifically her psoas, could actually help lead her to more self realizations, offering an opportunity to deepen her ability to love and be loved.

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Suzie was a spry, happy woman and young mother. Suzie was also an avid runner. Running made Suzie feel strong, calm, and competent. Running was a great exercise and a necessary part of her daily health regime. As a busy mom and wife, Suzie recognized that running felt essential for her emotional wellbeing. It was Suzie's daughter Hannah's health issues that spurred her to begin questioning her love of running. Hannah had presented some health challenges so Suzie consulted with me about her daughter's psoas. I offered several recommendations, and Suzie followed through with a physician and cranial sacral therapist for her daughter. While discussing Hannah's birth with the therapist, Suzie had a stunning moment of realization and started crying. This mother's desire to help her daughter started her on a journey of recalling

her own childhood trauma. Suzie's brothers had sexually molested her. The youngest of three and the only girl in her family, Suzie felt vulnerable. Not being one of the boys made life for Suzie a nightmare. Suzie was still running from her vulnerability, anger, and fear.

Running, of course, can be a pleasurable activity in and of itself, but it can also be an expression of the flight response. The need to flee, fight, or stand our ground are all very real strategies for defending our self. This strappy, young woman had found a way to cope with her pain, humiliation, and deep anger after having been violated. Having this realization did not mean that Suzie had to necessarily stop running. It meant she had to run consciously. It also meant she had to slow down, stop, and feel all her discomfort in order that she could provide herself with needed support and nourishment.

Suzie shared her story with me and we talked about adrenal health being essential for a functional parasympathetic response. Running as a serious sport or fitness activity demands a recovery program to prevent what can result in "over-training" symptoms associated with cortisol addiction. In other words, fleeing can eventually lead to a dependency on the very chemicals released when having a sympathetic (flight) response. I recommended speaking with a physician, working with a nutritionist, and possibly even consulting a professional aromatherapist who could focus on Suzie's metabolic system associated with breaking the cycle of fear. Working with essential oils, nourishing her tissue by taking mineral salt baths, and, most of all, learning how to face the feelings of vulnerability, gave Suzie the wherewithal to make better life choice decisions. It is not that running was not a healthy desire or a great exercise. Rather it was important to have more options for resolving the sense of fear. The questions that Suzie had to ask herself were what am I running away from and what do I wish for? Suzie chose to move towards pleasure in every aspect of her life and, as a result, the health of both she and her daughter, Hannah, improved.

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Chris was a successful athlete and a professional marathon runner who came to explore how the position of her pelvis and the condition of her psoas might be playing a part in her reproductive issues. She wanted children but had experienced several miscarriages. Chris' health professionals found nothing medically wrong so she began to explore what could be holding her back on her own. She wanted to learn about the psoas. We began by discussing how the nerves of the reproductive tissue penetrate through the psoas muscle and how her pelvic balance might influence the positioning of her uterus. This all made sense to Chris' quick intellect. While supporting Chris' legs in the catching and falling exploration, I immediately sensed an extremely tight psoas on both sides. Her psoas was not only taut and very dense but was also what I refer to as a "dry" psoas. Psoas tissue that is tight and dense (very muscular) can impinge on nerves as well as result in painful menstrual cramps. A dry psoas may shrink over time due to being recruited for support. This bio-intelligent tissue can signal levels of exhaustion and express a lack of resiliency in the whole system.

Chris' life and professional strategy was to win at all costs. She had a bright intellect, a powerful body, and a formidable will. She had approached getting pregnant with the same strategy that she had won marathons: to persist at all costs. This time, however, Chris was being brought to her knees. She could not make a child with the same will that she had won marathons. Chris was

losing for the first time and she did not like it. There were so many mixed emotions that it felt like something inside her had to give.

Although Chris was beginning to recognize that she would need to discover her feminine side if she was to carry an infant through birth, receptivity was unfamiliar and, truthfully, quite terrifying to her. It brought her face to face with something she might lack. First Chris had to become familiar with the experience of letting go, receiving, and even becoming vulnerable. In order to do this Chris had to first achieve some “give” or resiliency in her body tissue. One cannot simply stretch tight tissue; instead, Chris had to explore ways of hydrating her connective tissue so her nerves, circulatory system, and organs could function optimally. Most importantly, Chris had to stop engaging her “will center.” In the world of energetic medicine, the will center is located in the upper psoas where the kidneys literally float on top of what should ultimately be a juicy psoas. A growing fetus depends upon the mother to provide good “kidney energy” (i.e. the life force necessary for survival). To do this entails a process of hydrating tissue through micro-movements, breath, slowing down, and pausing. Pausing helps us to listen deeply to the wisdom that comes from the very core of our being. Chris would need to become a master at receptivity and shape shifting if she was to fully become a mother.

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Frank was a large, muscular man weighing 250 pounds and standing 6 foot 4 inches in height. Frank had spent much of his teens and twenties incarcerated. He knew how to fight, ward off, and intimidate. But Frank was very interesting to me because he consciously accepted being vulnerable. It was as if there was a very young part of Frank that held a deep wish to be accepted, seen, and loved. This was an interesting contrast to me. As a construction worker, Frank's huge body had been misused not only by work but also by other people who used his strength for their own needs. Friends would ask Frank to move their furniture, refrigerators, and pianos. Because people assume a big man can handle a great deal of weight, Frank had learned early to endure whatever he had to do by pushing through. When I first worked with Frank, I was very surprised to discover that he had a somatic sensitivity. Frank asked me to work with his psoas because of chronic low back pain. His back pain may have been due to all the heavy labor, but it was equally caused by never having ergonomics that truly supported his large frame. Tall children still growing unfortunately often have to sit on seats that do not fit them in school. And tall adults struggle with car and every restaurant chair because nothing in their world supports their large frame. But even more importantly, I felt a sense of longing that emanated from Frank's core. Deep inside Frank there was a small child that needed consistent love and physical care. He had a sweet sensitive nature but no one had tended to his needs. Large babies and big little boys are often expected to act older than they truly are. They are expected to whatever physically and emotionally comes their way and deal with it. Too often they are perceived as capable due to their size. When in fact they are young vulnerable babies in need of protecting. The reality is that all babies need to be babied while they are young.

Frank shared his relationship with his unstable mother with me. He ran away from home and by the time he was eight, lived on the streets, in foster care homes that were brutal, and eventually he ended up in prison, which became his only stable “home.” Frank used painkillers, alcohol, and marijuana in order to try to subdue his chronic back pain when what he really needed was to heal from a broken heart. Frank wanted to be seen for who he was on the inside not just for the big man on the outside. I sensed that he needed to be cared for rather than

having to care for others. But feeling worthy posed a huge challenge for Frank. I saw him as a soul willing to carry not only pianos and refrigerators, but also other people's emotional burdens. He was willing to sacrifice himself if it could help someone else or if he thought he might finally have his mother's love. Self-care and self-love were missing ingredients. Although his psoas was actually quite supple and responsive, it was as if Frank couldn't live his core truth. The push pull he experienced was not just pain from overused and abused muscles. Frank had a sweet psoas with little inner defense; however, he simply had no reference for accessing his own core needs or understanding that his needs were important or even valid. He lived for others, most importantly his mother.

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Robert was a tight, compact man. He was intelligent, perceptive, and incredibly sweet. A funny man he always saw the humor in life. He came to see me as he was interested in working with his psoas muscle. At first Robert tried to give up his weight in order not to tax me. However, the more he focused his attention within, the more he became aware that he wanted to accommodate me. I assured him I was ok and that he could explore his own sensation, allowing me to simply hold space for whatever might wish to reveal itself. His psoas worked very hard. Robert had scoliosis but that was not all. Robert had never been allowed as a child to express his emotions. Robert's hands were tied so to speak. I noticed his arms down to his hands did not move. He told me he would be hit if ever his emotions physically manifested. Contained and controlled, Robert felt everything deep within; nothing could bubble up to the surface of his skin, face, fingers, or toes. His psoas was being recruited to withhold the explosion of feeling and expression this boy, now a man, could not share.

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Sophia signed up for one of my Psoas workshops in a big city. She was not in the field of bodywork but came to work with me with the intention of enhancing her personal wellbeing. Sophia was over weight and her body language expressed a perpetual curling over into herself. She appeared defacing, a somewhat shy young woman, and, to me, very reserved. So I was surprised after the workshop when she came up and told me she wanted to work more with me. She joined other workshops and I saw Sophia begin expressing an inner strength. She seemed determined to explore her sensations and the very core of her being. At my annual mineral hot springs weeklong retreat she truly began exploring her somatic story.

Supporting Sophia's legs in the catching and falling exploration I noticed her breathing beginning to change. It was as if she was suspended in a ready state of fear. Sophia gave up the weight of her legs easily but deeper inside it seemed as if she was hanging on for dear life. I never try to get a person to give more weight by coaxing them to do so. Doing so feels manipulative and I believe it to be what already has happened to many people in their lifetime. Life was not dealt on their terms and as a result they leaned to anticipate whatever was being thrown at them. I do not want to stimulate this type of dynamic, as I intuitively believe doing so is a form of coercion that only drives the system deeper into strategizing safety. Rather, I patiently held space with no agenda. Sophia, however, wanted to use me and I wanted to be there for HER. Not the other way around. Sophia did not have to please me or do as I said. We would end our sessions simply by allowing her to explore as much as she wanted without my dictating the terms or abandoning her if I didn't get what I wanted (such as a released psoas). I

was there to simply witness her process and she had the power and the control to do what felt good to her. I did let her know she could give me as much weight as she wanted and that I was strong and could support her legs. Most of all, I verbally assured her that I would not let go. As she took the reigns and forgot about me, she simply gave herself permission to explore her own sense of trust, release, and vulnerability.

Over time our relationship developed, and Sophia shared her story about her relationship with her father. He was violent and seductive. He would grab her hair and drag her. She felt this relationship had carried over into all her relationships with both men and women. She didn't want to stand her ground for fear of what would follow but rather would relinquish her power to please and feel safe. Continuing to explore her sensation through movement, dance, somatic awareness, and art expression Sophia claimed her power. She found her footing and her ability to say no as well as yes. She learned to listen deeply to herself as she moved towards trusting her innate wisdom within her own belly core.

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Doniella came to explore the discrepancy between her right/ left movement patterns, which were causing hip socket issues, and the possibility of having to plan a future hip surgery if she could not resolve the issue. Doniella was fit and energetic, enjoying an active lifestyle of yoga, sports, and fitness; however, her right side of her body was experiencing stiffness and pain. I explained to Doniella that I believe when one side appears to be the predominant problem (without a specific injury) this is because this is the side can be sense the most. Thus, a persons thinks that just one psoas is giving them a problem when actually there is a more complex issue going on. The other side is equally part of the problem. As a spine-based organism human being organize from the core axis out to the limbs.

When a person senses each side doing something very different and not relating well I think the issue resides in the lack of skeletal integrity and therefore they must begin in the core axis to resolve the discrepancy. While I supported Doniella's legs in the catching falling exploration, I became aware of how vacant the left side of her body felt. Doniella's ability to release weight or sense my hand on her left side was vague and even confusing to her. As we continued to explore, I asked Doniella (by simply tapping the left knee) to bring more awareness to sensing weight in her leg, and foot. I suggested she begin by sensing her knee resting in my hand and to connect with the place where her knee and my hand connected. Her right side, on the on the other hand, was extremely tight and, rather than surrender her weight, she would use force to push her knee into my hand. I felt an over all tension and a resistance plus an over-forcing throughout her core. After we worked I explained how cross patterning explorations might be incredibly useful for helping her reestablish a sense of core integrity as well as for bringing the two sides of her self into harmony. Cross patterning explorations (such as presented in Feldenkrais or Brain Gym systems) help reestablish a connection to our core that is vital for coherent movement. It can quite literally bring us back to sensing the center of our being.

I also asked Doniella about her relationship with her mother and father. The symbolism of the two sides of our selves (the female and male) can play out in movement and expression. I explained it felt to me like there was anger or frustration on the right side while the left side seemed totally vacant. Doniella's eyes became very wide as she told me how her mother had never been very emotionally present when she was a child. Her father, on the other hand, was

her rock, but at the same time an alcoholic who blamed his wife for his drinking and always being emotionally overwhelmed. Not only were her family dynamics overwhelming but also Doniella was often put in the middle of the chaos. Doniella began to recognize that as a small child of six she never really knew which side to take or where she would receive support and this dynamic was playing out within her own sense of self.

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Henry contacted me through a common acquaintance. A retired professional, Henry finally had the time to enjoy a bit of play and was curious what exactly delving into a somatic exploration might bring to his creative writing projects. He did not have a specific physical problem. Henry just wanted a more dynamic life and a sense of passion he felt was missing. He was longing for a richer experience of the felt-sense world.

There are incredible books written on the cultivation of somatic awareness. Three of my favorites are *The Spell of The Sensuous* by David Abram, which deftly lures us back to our essential knowing. At the most primordial level of sensuous, bodily experience, we find ourselves in an expressive, gesturing landscape, in a world that *speaks*. Another one of my favorites is *The Wild Region of Lived Experience* by Danis Bois, PhD, who takes a somatic psycho-educational approach to encouraging an experience of wholeness stating "that is why we prioritize the use of the inner skills that are at the crossroads of the motor, sensory, and cognitive functions of the individual: attention, kinesthetic perception, thought, memory, sense-experiencing, empathy and tonic regulation" My very favorite writer, however, is Stephen Harrod Buhner who authored *The Intelligence of the Heart in the Direct Perception of Nature – The Secret Teachings of Plants*. This book offers a profound understanding of the steps needed to perceive all life forms with the heart (which by the way is how animals and plants speak to each other). If you switch the word plant to psoas, this book becomes a profound source for understanding the psoas as bio-intelligent tissue. As Buhner explains: "Embracing the reality of the feelings that come to us from the world is the first step in the decolonization of the soul. In this moment, the linear mind is truly left behind. This is the moment you begin to use a different mode of cognition-the moment you begin to think with your heart" ... and with your psoas. This is the book that transformed my approach to working with the psoas. Although the two former books are certainly great resources that I read much later in my evolution as an educator, Buhner's book is like an arrow, as it pierces the heart of the matter and catapulted me in the direction of core explorations I currently lead people through in my workshops.

I recognized in Henry a deep desire not to simply come to terms with his aging body in the later years of life, but to utilize this opportunity to delve much deeper into the crevices of the wrinkled existence of an unlived life. As a gesture of support for Henry's awakening, we played with movement in gravity and what showed up was an unleashed, unending well of sorrow. This sorrow felt universal in its source of sadness that was so primordial there seemed to be no hitting bottom. Meanwhile Henry was distracted by his thoughts, experiences, and memories. I asked him to focus on the sensation of his feet on the floor and I placed soft sandbags across each foot to help him stay grounded in the present moment. Often times I will add a weight across the feet, pelvis, or on the throat and chest to help orient a person who tends to dissociate or disconnect from experiencing their own sensory system. Weight helps all of us ground, land, and show up.

When Henry and I finished I spoke to him about the deep sorrow I felt and wondered if he was aware of this emotion. Henry said yes and then related to me his relationship with his mother, who was chronically depressed, possibly all of Henry's existence. In fact, he said he often felt this was such a familiar state of being he must have fermented in the womb of his mother's sorrow. He recalled as a child wanting to bring light and happiness but how nothing he did could transform this woman's life. He felt it colored every aspect of his own life and that the haze of her depression still surrounds him even after years of therapy.

What Henry especially found difficult was how to discover himself and his own sense of existence. What did he feel and sense? Could he enjoy life even if his mother was unable to? Would it be possible to cut through the haze of sorrow that he too felt because his mother was so unavailable? He felt he had lost contact with her before he ever had the opportunity to get to know her. Thus, he too felt great sorrow.

I shared what I know about perinatal psychology and embryological studies on the developing fetus. Having information can often be a starting point for awakening consciousness, which helps us understand that no matter what our experience, we, as developing organisms, have access to a molecular memory -- a wisdom so to speak --larger than life: Mother Earth, Mother Nature, and the Great Mother Cosmos is some of the names used for this larger field of information. When we can access this wisdom within our cells, tissue, blood, and bone, we offer ourselves a source of nourishment accessible beyond our earthly experience without any disassociation. To quote Steven Buhner ~

*When someone truly sees us
And, in caring, urges us
Into the warmth of a loving embrace, we leave the darkness
In which we have taken refuge
And come once more
Into the light*

What I understand this to mean is that by holding space for consciousness, the shift in the vibrational field changes the biological oscillation of cells and tissue, which allows innovation to flourish. Henry realized that even though he may have experienced a womb of sorrow, there is a larger container of awareness available that can support pleasure, passion, and creativity.