

AN INTRODUCTION TO PRACTICE

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A friend introduced me to Barbara Clark. We met for the first time in her small room in an apartment on East Sixty-Third Street. She handed me a heel bone and asked, “How does this go in your body?” This was my first lesson.

I came to her as a highly trained dancer. My technique was flawless, but I hurt in a kind of ignorance. My ignorance was a wound, though I didn’t realize it at the time. I didn’t know something that was very important.

Barbara asked me to practice my first image. “The body is round,” she said. I didn’t know what she was talking about or its implications. What does it mean to practice an image? I entered my studio. I had built a wonderful dance studio in my loft on Thompson Street. I lay on the floor. The image made me roll. I rolled and rolled until I could feel the roundness of my body, the volume of its spheres. The rolling contact with the floor brought awareness of this roundness. The roundness of the head, the rib cage, and the pelvis. The roundness of legs rolling in the hip sockets. The roundness of eyes resting in the eye sockets. The roundness of the mouth. I could feel the marvel of this landscape. The image had created a dance.

The Chalk Made a Perfect Circle: The “Chalk Circle Dance”

I decided to take a piece of chalk into my hand as I rolled, this time adding rising and falling. The chalk made a perfect circle on the floor. The *outline* of this action reflected the *inner* form of roundness. The three-dimensional sphere had made a two-dimensional circle. It was perfect logic. I felt it.

Then the exploration began. We—John Rolland, Marsha Paludan, and



Nancy Topf performing the *Chalk Circle Dance*. Photo credit: Babette Mangolte (ca. 1970s).

I—conducted workshops. What were we teaching? What were we doing to create a way of explaining the body in a form that students could immediately practice? How were we to create a practice that included the important anatomical information, the images we were getting from Barbara?

Barbara remained our teacher, giving us new images to practice. We practiced. It was a meditation. We moved, and it moved us. Our initiation of movement, our patterns, changed. Where the dance came from was new.

We had entered a meditation practice, meditating on spine, on ribs, on head, internalizing the anatomical principles of alignment, and finding their dance.

In this book, I would like to describe the principles that became essential to my understanding and invite you to partake in this practice.

The material is taken from workshops, lectures, and discussions that were conducted at Windhover, a camp for dance on the coast of Massachusetts, and from my yearlong course in New York City.

What I describe are the underlying principles. The simplicity behind what seems to be complex work. The simplicity lies in looking deeply into one idea. The simplicity of having one idea to look at fully, staying

with one idea to enlarge and deepen: the idea of the center. The question, “What is it?” has been a place from which to find relationships to greater subjects. Most humanistic, philosophic, religious, and psychological investigations are asking this question. “What and where and why is center?” The need to find balance. The finding of a relationship to opposition; the containing of two opposing but related ideas in the mind; thinking and feeling in two directions; thinking as feeling; thinking as physiological and neurological transformation; creating accurate ideas about the body from placing the “eye” in the center; changing the view; moving the eye or even creating or having an eye, about vision, an accurate vision of the body.

We direct our eye toward what aids our physical, mental, spiritual, and psychological understanding of center: the fact that the front of the spine is closer to the front than the back at the level of the belly; the fact that the distance from the tip of the tongue to the back of the throat is equal to the depth from the front of the lumbar spine to the front of the belly.

Connecting to the information physically, practicing your vision, practicing seeing the bones, seeing the form, seeing the connection, and letting physical experience and transformation be the result of vision, of image, of clearly knowing, and seeing that knowing, seeing, and sensing are the same: We have no language that puts this process into words.

This book can help you enter your body with kindness, curiosity, and understanding. It can help you find logic where chaos existed, and it can illuminate what was dark by turning on an internal light, a way toward seeing and thus a way toward changing your habits.

I put my hand on your belly. I help you find center. You go deep through the organs, you find the spine, your lumbar spine, your psoas muscle. You put your hand on your belly; you see your lumbar spine. You go deep behind the organs. You find your psoas muscle.

James Hillman says, “Consciousness has more to do with images than with will, with reflective insight into rather than manipulation over objective reality.” We become conscious; we reflect and become curious. We change manipulation into reflection, change judgment into reflection. Reflection brings wonder.

Barbara Clark’s last book with which I was directly involved is *Body Proportion Needs Depth Front to Back* (1977). Her next and final book, *The*

Body Is Round: Use All the Radii, was completed before she died at the age of ninety-three, in 1982. My work continues where we left off.

I was in my studio on Leonard Street in TriBeCa, around 1986. I was teaching a class about the hands and feet, and it dawned on me that when someone holds their feet with their hands, they are creating a circle with their body and the center of this circle are the psoas and lumbar spine. Reflecting on this idea has led and continues to lead to the discovery of many practical applications and implications. In this book, I will describe these discoveries so that you can share in their usefulness. The diagonal line of the psoas as it goes across the pelvis takes you deep behind the organs. “Body Proportions Need Depth,” said Barbara, but how do we get in there?

The psoas is a muscle current, a route directing the mind, body, and imagination to the center deep inside. It is a location, a place, a transition from muscle to bone leading to a structural and mechanical understanding of the body’s logic. When you learn about the psoas muscle, you begin to understand and experience the body’s depth.

This practice goes bone-deep. It leads you into finding meditation and uncovering and disclosing the innate physical intelligence. It discusses the listening and resulting responsiveness of the body. By emphasizing a practical understanding of the abstract laws of physics, it extends and deepens the Newtonian world and makes it feel real. The practice creates metaphors and images and makes clear, simple, and accurate the language of the body that we take for granted. It honors the clarity of the language we unknowingly internalize and brings awareness to the conceptions, misconceptions, and lack of conceptions we have created about our bodies. This practice makes use of language by giving it action, creating a way of seeing, a respect, a guide toward understanding and transformation.