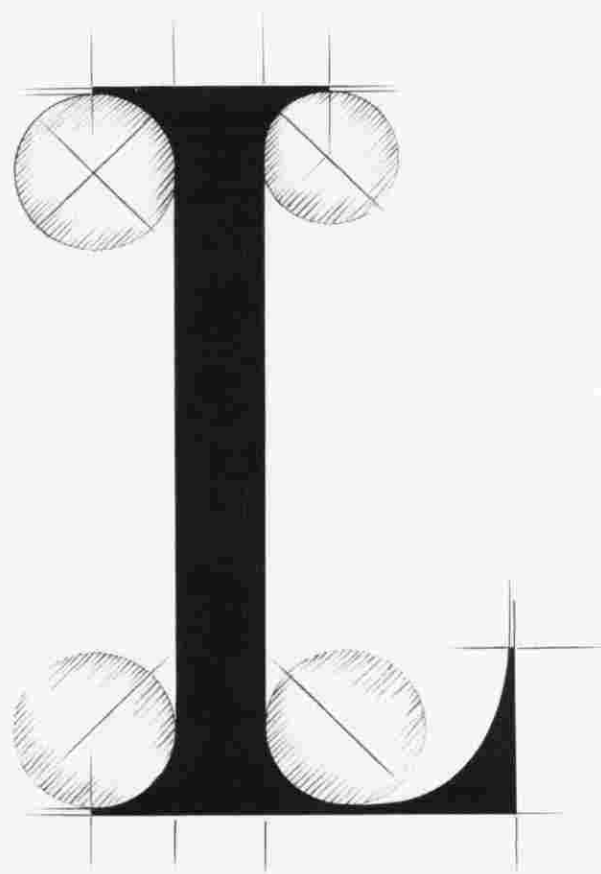


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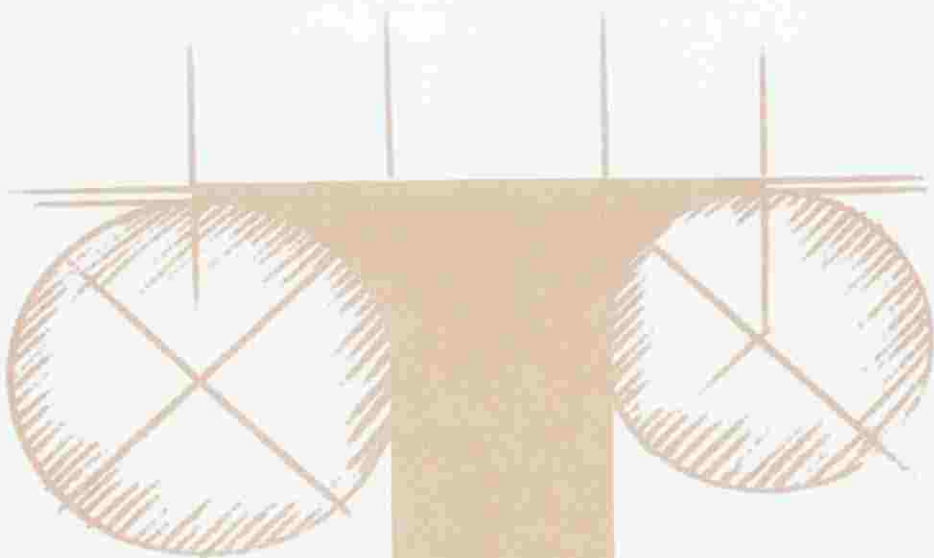
Language

BY THOMAS MYERS

An excursion
through the
alphabet in
somatic terms



ILLUSTRATIONS BY TOM BOWMAN



Body Language is a column where we explore the alphabet in terms of the body and bodywork. After a period of rest to deal with some deaths in the family and a resulting change of address, we take up our pen again to continue the Body Language series, which will appear in every other issue until we complete our tour. In this issue, we explore the letter L, the value of goads to move us forward along our path, and the work of bodywork pioneer Peter Levine.

On our somatic journey through the alphabet, we come to the 12th letter, L. This letter was originally called *lamed*, and carried the meaning of an ox-goad. The original pictogram of the letter showed the handle and the pointed stem of this common tool used by the nomadic cattle herders native to the Middle East, where our alphabet developed. It was employed, as the name implies, to prick the animal and cause it to move (see Figure 1A). Some scholars, though, interpreted the pictogram as a rope (to lead the animal) or a king's scepter, the symbol of his earthly power to move his people.

As usual with the development of a letter, *lamed* went through several changes of orientation (see Figure 1B), but the basic shape remained. The letter entered the Greek alphabet as *lambda* (see Figure 1C), which eventually

became the symbol of gay pride for the Lambda organization, and the use of the lower-case lambda signifies liberation for gays and transsexuals. Since the lambda is also used as a symbol for energy in physics and chemistry equations, it also symbolizes the energy in the gay-liberation movement. Lambda has thus been a kind of ox-goad to energize our society's notions of prejudice and tolerance, and the acceptance of "otherness."

Abstracting from the notion of the cattle prod, the letter took on additional meanings, at first "to cause to move" or "to change from rest to activity." Later meanings revolved chiefly around study, learning and teaching. (The idea of teaching as a goad to prod the student to move is a familiar one to this writer in my own role as a teacher. Some students seem to need more prodding than others, and I confess to wishing occasionally for a modern, electric zapper to be applied to a few choice acupuncture points of my more lazy-minded students.)

More seriously, considering L as a goad to education, our profession thankfully requires increasingly longer trainings to reach basic professional competency. When I first started as a massage therapist almost 30 years ago, the 500 hour industry standard did not exist – there simply were no standards, and barely an industry. I believe my original program was about 100 hours long, and of quite



Figures 1A-1C

The letter L began as a pictograph of an ox-goad (top) or cattle prod, which was written in any old direction over the centuries. Standing up, it approached our modern letter L (middle), though in Greek it has a slightly different shape, the lambda (bottom).

low quality, despite the sterling intentions of the teachers. I learned to give a decent fluffy massage, but got very little in terms of any of the contraindications, pathology, and wide variety of techniques and background to which students are exposed today.

It is this rapidly increasing knowledge-base in our end of manual therapy which requires the longer initial training period. While number of hours does not automatically equate to quality of education, the general upward trend in initial training length is indicative of a profession whose skill set and ability to serve is getting ever better.

Along with longer schooling comes an acceleration in new brand names, an abundance of new information, and the concomitant requirement for continuing education (built into most professions' certification programs, including our own American Massage Therapy

Association and National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork, as well as state requirements). These requirements are designed to goad the therapist into increasing his or her skill level, and to keep up with the times in terms of changing approaches and clinical findings.

Though there has been some resistance to the idea of these periodic requirements, there is no doubt that those

among us who do not submit themselves to continuing education run the risk of becoming stale, and repeating the same basic ideas in session after session. Therefore, one should seek out continuing education courses that will act as a goad to new attitudes and practices, not courses that will simply confirm what we are already doing.

I often say to my students: "Think about the work that you were doing two or three years ago. If you don't think that just about everything you were doing back then is more or less embarrassing, then you aren't developing very quickly in your profession."

The feeling, "I should get all my clients back so that I could do them all over again for free with what I know now" is a good feeling to have. I've been in practice 28 years now, and I still have that embarrassing feeling of

how bad my sessions were five years ago, and thank goodness I can still feel that way!

"Don't worry," I tell myself and my students, "you were doing good work then, you're just doing better work now." Keep that feeling going by exposing yourself to the ox goad of challenging continuing education.

Born to study stress

One of the places you can continually educate yourself is in the world of somatic psychology. We have explored this arena in the past few issues through conversations with Don Hanlon Johnson, Deane Juhan and Stanley Keleman. In this column we will take one more look, this time at Somatic Experiencing[®], developed by our bodywork pioneer for the letter L, Peter Levine, Ph.D.

Levine is the author of *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma* (North Atlantic Books, 1997), which was translated into eight languages. This book provides a very interesting and practically tested model for how to gently unlock the traumatic response. The book should be required reading for every therapist, and those bodyworkers who want to specialize or be competent in working with trauma-



**Peter Levine,
Ph. D., the
originator of
Somatic
Experiencing**

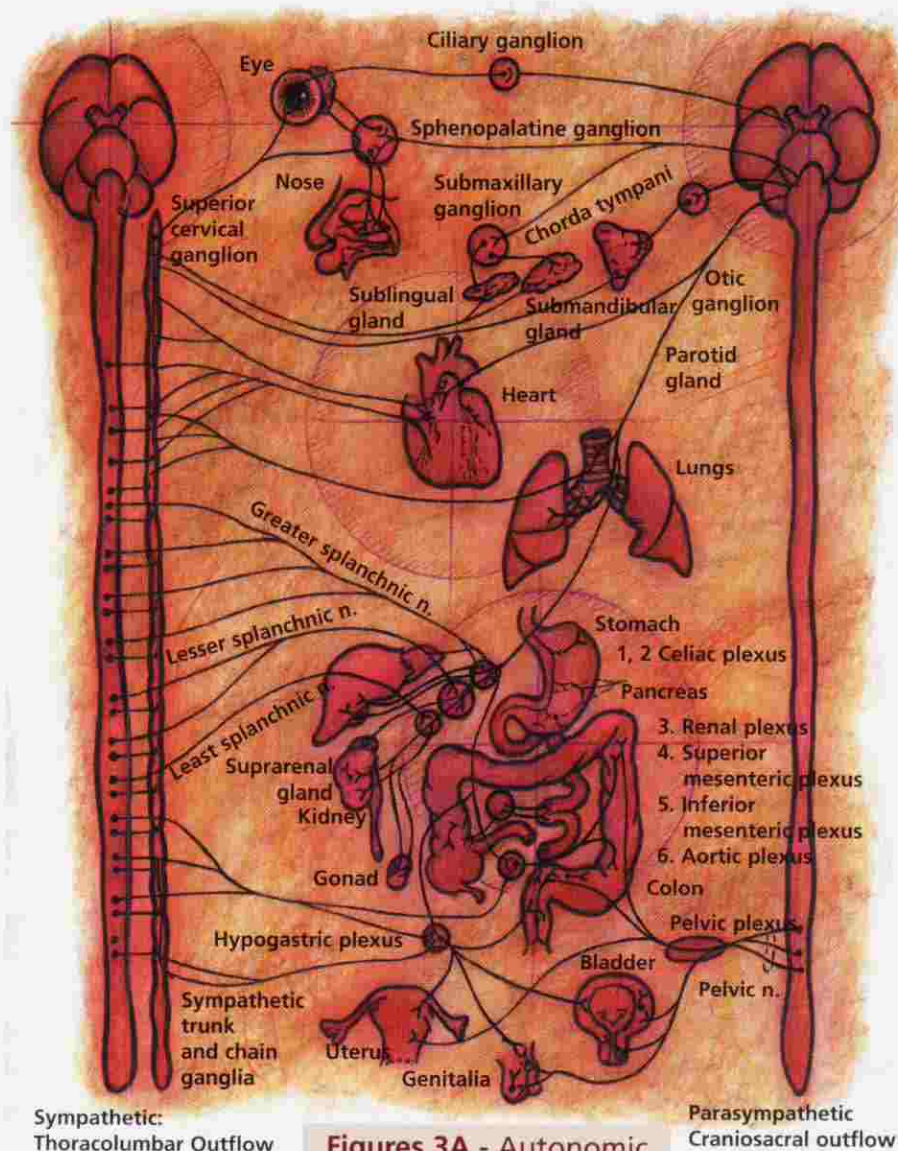
Courtesy of
Peter Levine

tized clients of any level could do a whole lot worse than jumping to the next level and getting trained in Somatic Experiencing.

Levine directs the Foundation for Human Enrichment in Lyons, Colorado. He holds two doctorate degrees, one in medical biophysics and another in psychology. But like most of the originators we have featured in this series, Levine is as much artist as scientist, and a master of the incredibly complex and delicate art of teasing people away from their traumatic patterns without (as can happen in clumsier hands) damaging them further in the process.

"When I started to work with people who came to see me, either for physical symptoms, how they felt about themselves, or for interpersonal and life problems," he says, "I became amazed how a wide source of events, long forgotten in a person's past, [were] displayed on their bodies as I learned to track them. As certain spontaneous movements and involuntary reactions in their bodies emerged, it became increasingly clear that these previously overwhelming events had become imprinted on the bodies, behaviors and self-concept. And, most astonishingly, their symptoms frequently seemed to evaporate."

In his doctoral work, Levine was drawn toward understanding how the nervous system and the body respond to accumulated stress. At the time (the late '60s), ideas about stress were "largely based on Hans Selye's bank-account model of stress," he says. "Disease was seen as a subtractive process whereby a person had a limited amount of stress currency in their life's bank account. If they withdrew too much of this tender then they would experience eventual breakdown. However, my building experience with clients having various stress disorders showed me that this passive process wasn't the true



Figures 3A - Autonomic Nervous System.

Figure 3B- Autonomic Nervous System Functions

| Organ | Sympathetic stimulation | Parasympathetic stimulation |
|------------------|---|---|
| Eye | Dilates pupil | Constricts pupil |
| Sweating | Adrenergic: Stinky armpit and groin sweat Sweaty hands and feet | Cholinergics Light, whole-body sweat |
| Skin | Constricts arterioles (pales) | Dilates arterioles (flushes) |
| Heart | Increased rate | Decreased rate |
| Lungs | Bronchial dilation | Bronchial constriction |
| Stomach | Stimulates alkaline juices | Stimulates acid juices |
| Intestine | Decreased motility and tone | Increased motility and tone |
| Anus | Increases contraction | Relaxes contraction |
| Adrenals | Stimulates adrenalin release | n/a |
| Bladder | Inhibits wall, contracts sphincter | Contracts wall, inhibits sphincter |
| Erectile tissues | Promotes orgasm | Promotes filling (vasodilation) |

story. I was inspired by the resiliency of people to dissolve their long-standing stress conditions."

Selye (author of *The Stress of Life* and *Stress and Distress*) and Nobel Prize laureate Nikolaas Tinbergen, who is credited with revitalizing the science of ethology and using field observations of animals under natural conditions, supported Levine's groundbreaking work on stress theory.

During the '70s and '80s, more therapists and bodyworkers wanted to learn the practicalities of what Levine was doing, which required that he make an explicit method out of what he had been developing intuitively.

"This meant, at least at first, to make up somewhat artificial building blocks," he says. "It was only after some years—and as the people who were studying with me started having similar results—that I started to have some confidence that I could pass on what I had developed. I was then consumed with the increasing demand to teach and then, as if overnight, to manage an international teaching organization with faculty, and seemingly, never-ending responsibilities. Then we began working in disaster [areas], and with [people suffering from] the result of wars and ethnopolitical conflicts."

This new aspect of Levine's work has led him to many troubled spots in the world, including hospitals, pain clinics and treatment programs for torture victims and refugees; examining stress factors in space flight for NASA; and helping the Hopi tribe develop a culturally appropriate therapy for Native Americans. He has also worked in the Middle East and Yugoslavia with the historical wounds of trauma.

Levine is a member of the Institute of World Affairs Task Force of Psychologists for Social Responsibility. He also serves on the Presidential Initiative on Ethnopolitical Warfare, to develop a

curriculum for dealing with disasters and genocidal conflict.

When once asked by a TV interviewer how he came to this work, he paused for a long time—thus putting stress patterns into the producer—and finally said, "Trauma invented me to study it." After so many years and so much work in building this art and science, he adds, "This searching and development has been a treasured covenant, a spiritual gift that for some mysterious reason seems to have been handed to me for safekeeping and transmission."

Fight, flight or freeze

The basic premise of Levine's work is that traumatic response is an array of biological responses to threat, such as prey animals would have, which have become stuck, frozen, incomplete. The trapped energy of these incomplete responses wreaks subtle havoc in both body and mind, pro-

ducing ineffective and confusing responses to everyday situations and relationships—and, certainly in times of stress. We are familiar with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in soldiers and victims of great tragedy; but less-obvious forms of this condition afflict many people who were faced with what was (to them at the time) any kind of overwhelming experience, especially, of course, in childhood, when it is easy to be overwhelmed.

The design of Somatic Experiencing is to allow the client to melt the frozen response, and complete the uncompleted action. The understanding basic to Somatic Experiencing is the design of the human nervous system. Underlying our cognitive and emotional veneer is a very strong but very basic seesaw between two ancient parts of the autonomic, or automatic, nervous system. One side of this system, the





Figure 5 - Three representative mammals: the bison, cheetah and rabbit. What are their responses to danger? The molar-dominated ungulates, like the bison, cows, sheep and deer, tend to find safety in crowds; the canine-dominated carnivores, such as the cheetah and all other types of cats and dogs, tend to fight; the incisor-dominated rodents, including rabbits and squirrels, tend to rely on hyper-alert senses and speedy fleeing. What is your preferred mode?

parasympathetic, takes care of repose and repair; and is active all the time we are at rest, and mightily active after we eat. (As a teacher, I have to perform more antics in my afternoon classes to keep my students' attention, all somnolent and parasympathetically tuned as they deal with lunch.) The other side, the sympathetic, is a superbly designed and intricate system for responding to danger and change—what we often refer to as the “fight-or-flight” response. This system charges our body with adrenaline, and we can use that energy to fight the threat or flee the danger.

But what if neither fighting nor fleeing is available? A molested or

abused child, a war victim, a passenger in an automobile accident, a surgical patient, a birthing baby, and many others can be mobilized for strong muscular action by this system, but be unable to perform the necessary action for a variety of reasons. In this case, a third “F” is added to fight or flight: freeze! This playing-possum type of response has not been examined so thoroughly, but Levine sees this as a common human response to the overwhelming.

A prey animal perks up into alertness at the first sign of danger. My wife keeps rabbits, and we are forever trying to keep the foxes and weasels out of their large, open pens. The rabbits, whose flight response is bet-

ter organized than their fight response, will sometimes take fright and peel out, scraping their noses, poor things, when they hit the limit of the chicken wire. But when the danger is over, the rabbits surrender to the involuntary mechanisms that discharge the excess survival energy and allow their parasympathetic systems to start digesting carrots again. You can see this discharge where the deer and the antelope play: After they have been startled, they run a little way to discharge the energy, or they shiver along their flanks.

Our nervous systems are similarly constructed, and work in ways similar to our animal friends—we are, after all, mammals—but we live in an almost completely artificial world, where our higher brain centers create an internal world that sometimes overrides the actual data from the outside world. In fact, if you count up the neural connections, we are 100,000 times more tuned to our interior world, our “picture” of the world, than we are to the outside world itself through the doors of our senses.

This means that a human being can have an overwhelming experi-



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ence and go into the freeze mode, where the necessary action (fighting or fleeing) remains incomplete. But then, unlike most animals, we are uniquely capable of maintaining that freeze response by constantly referencing the internal world where the uncompleted experience continues to exert its influence.

This freeze response appears docile, but in fact is still highly charged. Often this manifests as an unconscious recreation of the traumatic experience in the person's life; a truly terrible situation that traps the person in an unending cycle of hitting themselves on the head and blaming others (or their evil twin) for it. And, of course, this situation lays the groundwork for a host of diseases and serious physical conditions if it stays in place long enough.

Honoring our instincts

Because the whole process has been submerged over time, the signs of inner turmoil and its changes are not consciously available, and a good deal of the training in Somatic Experiencing is concerned with the ability to read and interpret the subtle shifts in the underlying nervous system (see Figure 3).

Through this understanding of the psychobiology of trauma, Levine has developed a powerful methodology for breaking the cycle and resolving the isolation. What are often described as symptoms, and medicalized, Levine sees as adaptive coping mechanisms as the nervous system tries to manage the charged energy of the remaining trauma response. Somatic Experiencing is dependent neither on drugs nor on talk therapy. The bodily sensations are the door into the instinctual brain, and Levine gently guides his clients into the blocked sensations, helping them regain the ability to self-regulate the activity of their own runaway nervous systems.

"If we abandon our instincts," says Levine, "we limit our evolutionary choices."

Learning to live in harmony with our instincts, developed over many millions of years of outdoor communal living—while embedded in an industrial world of nuclear families, electric lights and humongous cities—is the major challenge of the 21st century. Without finding the harmony between our inner animal self and our outer, culturally bound creation, we will perish in either an ecological or a social disaster.

The signs are everywhere, and the touch and movement renaissance is one ray of hope in an otherwise alienated and alienating world. Levine's Somatic Experiencing is a particularly sophisticated interpretation of how to reach that harmony for the split inside of each person, especially those whose experience has taken them over the edge of normal response to their hectic lives. M

1. *Mysteries of the Alphabet*, by Marc-Alain Ouaknin, 1999, Abbeville Press, Paris, France.

Thomas Myers studied directly with Ida Rolf, Ph.D., and Moshe Feldenkrais, Ph.D., and has practiced integrative bodywork for more than 25 years in a variety of cultural and clinical settings. He directs Kinesis Seminars, Inc., which develops and runs international training courses for manual and movement therapists. Myers served as a founding member of the National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork and as chair of the anatomy faculty at the Rolf Institute. His articles have appeared in numerous magazines and journals, and he is the author of Anatomy Trains—Myofascial Meridians for Manual and Movement Therapists. (Churchill Livingstone, 2001).

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