

INTRODUCTION

“Before I die I want to see enough change happening...to say I’ve helped things along a bit...What’s the point of living if I don’t leave something for others? I’ve got certain talents, certain understandings; it’s in some sense my own personal obligation to myself and other human beings to help them in any way I can. It has nothing to do with power. It has to do with loving other people and being concerned with the human condition.”¹

~Thomas Hanna Ph.D. (1928–90)

The sentiment expressed above typified the late Thomas Hanna, Ph.D. Hanna made every effort to leave the world a better place for his time in it. The health and wellness methods (referred to herein as “somatics”) that were developed by Hanna are based on those “certain talents and understandings,” and collectively represent an approach that is unique to the human condition. Countless other modalities purport to ease common neuromuscular maladies, from mild discomforts to outright pain; but results often vary widely between patients, and depending on their circumstances. Quite often persons seeking relief end up with temporary relief at best (palliation), instead of “problem solved.”

No other conventional or non-conventional healing method approaches the elimination of pain and the restoration of overall personal health in the manner of somatics. Though other modalities may eliminate or ease pain and

1 *East West* interview with Mirka Knaster, 2/89.

suffering in some cases, somatics is often effective where other methods are not. Therefore, it is my great pleasure to share with readers the philosophical, theoretical, practical, and technical aspects of modern somatics.

Though I only entered this field some thirteen years after Hanna's passing, I have been passionate about somatic education since my first hands-on encounter. I came to somatics with an injury that had me in constant discomfort and occasional outright pain, with a much restricted range of motion. I developed what is known in the vernacular as a "frozen" shoulder. Being a martial arts professional, this injury went beyond mere inconvenience. My career was at risk. I pursued a litany of alternative approaches, including chiropractic, applied kinesiology, deep tissue massage, homeopathy, acupuncture, and even more conventional physical therapy to resolve my shoulder issue, all to no avail. Serendipitously, I came across Thomas Hanna's book, *Somatics*, which led me to the Somatic Systems Institute in Northampton, Massachusetts. A single one-hour session there was all that was required to put my shoulder right, restored to a hundred percent working order after a year of constant pain and stiffness. It seemed a bit surreal. It was too easy.

Amidst my delight and amazement at having recovered full use of my shoulder in such short order, the implications for me and my students were immediately obvious. I inquired about professional training and signed on for the first available practitioner training module. Since early in my training I've been fortunate to help many other people in similar dire need. My only regret is having missed the opportunity to meet Thomas Hanna who, by my way of thinking, was one of the great unheralded minds of modern times.

I undertook the task of writing this book about somatic education, hoping to make an important addition to the field. Thomas Hanna already wrote what I, and many other somatics professionals, regard as the definitive book on somatic education. As many times as I've read *Somatics*, I still find myself musing on how, or even if, it might be possible to improve on his original work, so thorough and articulate was the original text. Even so, I remain committed, along with a host of others, to ensuring that Hanna's legacy, in the form of qualified

practitioners utilizing his methods, is propagated in order to lessen unnecessary human pain and suffering.

My intent, therefore, is not to improve on Hanna's original work so much as to complement it by offering an expanded perspective on his legacy. This undertaking seems to me especially timely given the current dual concerns over our already overburdened healthcare system, coupled with the growing numbers of aging baby boomers advancing through their middle years and beyond toward that stage of life when the culmination of a life lived is most likely to exact its heaviest toll. In the pages that follow I shall present an argument for how somatic education can provide some measure of relief, both for individuals and for our healthcare system overall.

Since the time of René Descartes,² conventional Western science, technology, and medicine have been largely defined by an approach that is best described as reductionist and mechanistic. According to this approach everything is held to be assembled at some level by basic building blocks, and by the assumption that these units can be dismantled and reduced to their smallest denominators, their secrets revealed, and then reassembled intact, in many cases for gainful pursuit. This approach has many claims to its efficacy, and rightfully so. Were it not for advances made in the name of Western science and medicine I might be writing with charcoal on papyrus instead of typing away on my computer. Though hubris and shortsightedness have, at times, reflected poorly on conventional science and medicine, we have a great deal to be thankful for in this Western model. Advances in science and technology characterize and define modern life.

It may therefore strike proponents of this model as somewhat heretical to suggest that any promise of powerful healing, and even optimal wellness, exists beyond its mechanical and reductionist borders. Granted, for individuals already accustomed to nontraditional therapeutic modalities, e.g. traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), classical homeopathy, ayurvedic medicine, and assorted indigenous systems, such a claim as this proffers no great revela-

2 René Descartes 1596–1650.

tion. Even so, the special promise of this book is to familiarize readers with a revolutionary method of healing and wellness that is founded in conventional neurophysiology, but which calls for no technical, mechanical, or intrusive therapeutic measures. Rather, simple education is the means by which life-changing gains may be achieved by implementing the user-friendly methods described throughout this text.

The last hundred or so years have shown us mind-boggling advances on many fronts, from the smallest of the small to the largest and farthest imaginable. Scientific, technical, and medical marvels aside, the twentieth century was also characterized by certain, more individually relevant though less-widely touted, advances. These advances are credited to a small field of somatic innovators, each of whom struggled against prevailing wisdom in seeking acceptance for his or her theories and methods.³ The most recent of these was Thomas Hanna, Ph.D.

Hanna was an early protégé and colleague of Moshe Feldenkrais, the founder of Functional Integration and Awareness Through Movement. Hanna's approach differed from that of Feldenkrais and other somatic predecessors in that Hanna borrowed from conventional science and medicine to add in 1) a comprehensive diagnostic theory, 2) a general somatic theory of sensorimotor process, and 3) a method of somatic education that engaged the learner's motor actions to involve the full capacity of the sensorimotor feedback loop.

Hanna's somatic education system strikes me as particularly unique in that it sprang from a philosophical as well as practical mandate held by its founder. Thomas Hanna saw himself as a pragmatist because of his belief that human beings have the wherewithal to solve problems, both extrinsically (via science, technology, and the like), and intrinsically within their own bodies,

3 Among these notables are F. Mathias Alexander, Elsa Gindler, and Gerda Alexander.

or somas.^{4,5} Hanna's great passion was in facilitating optimal wellness and total harmony between body and consciousness so that mankind might learn to live freely and painlessly with an enhanced ability for self-determination.

In the years before his death Thomas Hanna conducted a series of seminars to introduce his new educational method to the public. His weekend trainings in guided movement regularly drew hundreds of people. He was a prolific teacher and writer, yet he was not able to see his dream of truly wide-scale propagation of his teaching method fully realized before his untimely passing, at least not on any scale that extended considerably beyond the scope of his own practice. Happily, Hanna did plant the seeds of his accomplishments, making it possible for others to pick up where he left off.

Approximately parallel to Hanna's work, and in the years since his death, there have been impressive advances in the neurosciences. These sciences have evolved on a vastly more comprehensive (and well-funded) scale as compared to homespun somatic disciplines. "Neuroscience" is an umbrella term for many evolving subfields, e.g., neuropsychology, psychoneuroimmunology, etc. New branches and applications of neuroscience are still being unveiled—neuroeconomics, neuroforensics, neurotheology, neuroaesthetics, and neuroethics, to name a few.

Throughout this book I cite the work and accomplishments of many leading brain researchers, men and women whose cutting-edge research offers invaluable insight into the deepest workings of the brain and nervous system, including the brain's potential for neuroplasticity (adaptive change). Much of what is revealed as a result of research on the brain has direct relevance to somatics. With respect to the various sciences, I want to be clear from the start that this is a book primarily about sensorimotor health and wellness. This is about getting your muscles and your brain to collaborate optimally as regards

4 "Somatology: An Introduction to Somatic Philosophy and Psychology," Pt 1, *Somatics Journal*, XV, 2, 07.

5 In his teachings Hanna used the term "soma" rather than "body" to denote the individual person or being from the individual's own first-person perspective. Throughout this text I have deliberately opted for the more colloquial term "body" to keep things simple, even though HSE addresses aspects of the whole person.

voluntary motor function, so that you can learn to live in your own body in the best way possible. This information is for and about you.

As fascinating as the various neurosciences are on their merits, the upshot is that conventional brain research has not, to date, offered the majority of people who fall well within the mean any prospect of rapid non-pharmacological relief from ordinary bodily pain. No brain-related academic or medical research has revealed the cause or delivered a cure for common back pain, or for the debilitating effects of aging on the body. Somatics, on the other hand, has effectively done just that, perhaps not for all of the pain of all people all of the time, but certainly in a way and to an extent that should inspire health providers and lay people everywhere to sit up and take notice. Somatics has exposed the “myth of aging” for what it is.

As a pioneer in the field of somatic health and wellness, Thomas Hanna left more than his fair share on the table to upgrade the human condition. The seeds he sowed have slowly taken root, and the educational and wellness methods he developed are now on the brink of full flourish.