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Embodied Inquiry

Gene Diaz
Lesley University, USA

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Embodied Inquiry

I have to begin by saying that I consider myself a recovering academic. For me this means that, having left full-time employment at university, I am in the process of recovering a way of being in the world that includes more risk-taking and imagination, one that is free from the many self-imposed restrictions in language and practice that I had adopted to be part of the academic community. I had learned the rules of research, the practices of pedagogy, the canons of curriculum. Few of them included expressions of a sensual nature, specific engagements of the body, dance or poetic expression. I had been a painter once, have always loved to dance, and write poetry that I share mostly with myself. While I could find ways to be creative in my work as a faculty member and administrator, and while teaching teachers to integrate the arts into the curriculum, I struggled to integrate my creative artistic work into my academic career. And I have tried, and continue to try, to become once again immersed in the creative process, to experience the “flow” described so well by Csikszentmihalyi (1996).

Thus, reading Snowber's poetic memoir of a creative life lived within similar circumstances causes a certain envy, a yearning to become more like her, as well as considerable wonder and deep admiration. She continues to work within the academy and, notwithstanding, appears to imagine and create throughout every living moment. In *Embodied Inquiry* she offers not an academic narrative peppered with references and cluttered with discipline-based jargon, but stories and poems of the spirit. As she searches for deep spiritual and sensual connections she invites the reader to join her (Join! Join!). Reading this diminutive book I bathed in the beauty of her voice as it glided, no, danced, across the page, offering soothing phrases in recognition of the real, hectic lives we live, with admonitions to ameliorate them by purposefully engaging with the sensual.

Drawing on her childhood, with poems and stories about her mother and father, and later her children, and her womanhood, Snowber has created a poetic narrative with words that flow and pulse, thrumming with the rhythm of her heart. With illustrations from activities in her classes she invites us into her world as a teacher, artist and scholar. Not just to notice how she practices fully embodied knowing, but to invite the reader to practice embodied inquiry along with her, to explore how to make meaning through sensual, aesthetic experiences. Her words play the rhythm of a drum, inviting us, as rhythm does, to move with her, and, yes, to dance.

The intimacy of her words matches the intimacy with which she asks us to engage in the world around us, "the sensual art of living and being" (p. 30). As she notes, she doesn't separate the personal and the professional in her writing, or in her life. While these aspects of how we live always intersect, in some instances they are presented as separate, such as the recent two biographies of the painter Chuck Close, one titled *Work* and the other, *Life*, two separate books. Snowber melts them together so that a border cannot be distinguished between them. Her life is one, whether she is cooking, dancing, teaching or writing poetry. The full richness of sensuality permeates all aspects of the actions she describes, and she invites us to encounter this full richness in our own lives.

Snowber's creative syntax and grammar, and her playfulness with words, belie her serious endeavor to engage with questions of reality and spirituality. Finding dance within guidance, hear and ear within heart, and rewriting domesticity to the expressive demonstrative of domesticity, all contribute to the surprising humor and irony that is encountered throughout the book. Only she could envision "pelvic inquiry" among our attempts to "be hip" (p. 70). I have to disagree, however, with her suggestion of "bodyfulness" in lieu of mindfulness. For me, mindfulness is an embodied practice that includes listening to the body, becoming fully aware of the body in the context of the world, and celebrating our connectedness. While it might be a bit of a misnomer, mindfulness seems to include bodyfulness, as I understand it.

I welcome Snowber's generous offerings and invitations to "let out your own stories, gestures and bodily understandings," and "to live through your body and be open by experience" (p. xv). She asks us "to bring the possibilities of how our senses and bodily ways of perceiving...can inform our personal and professional lives" (p. xiv). Yet I struggle to make these actions daily practice, just as I struggle to make mindfulness meditation a daily practice. Perhaps this book can act as my reminder. And as I go back to the poetry of Billy Collins to share his ironic ponderings on daily life, I can go back to this book to be reminded of the possibilities of embodied inquiry, of living more fully through each sensual act of knowing. As Snowber writes in the beginning pages, "I intend my words to be an angel's nudge," words of encouragement to trust the wisdom of my body. Because we write who we want to be, and who we want to become, these words also act as Snowber's intentions.

This small jewel of a book drove me to write. The morning after I finished reading it, I picked up my journal and began again to make marks on the page, to notice, and yes to relish, the loops and curves of the writing, the smooth texture and rich vanilla color of the paper, the fun of drawing small images embedded within the text...all the physicality of writing with my body. Usually I do my writing as I am doing now, fingertips padding across the smooth black keys, tapping small square surfaces while the linear image of text, designed by someone else, populates the page, conforming with the rules of the machine, the regulations of the styles, the rigidity of the format. Two different writing experiences, each with advantages and disadvantages. One honors the messiness and irregularities of the body, the other honors the neat, replicable processes of the machine. Yet, both are expressions of ideas communicated through text.

And this book drove me to re-read my own words, to recall my own intentions, "I call, too, for an embodied knowing, for a full engagement of our beings in the process of learning: to learn by dancing, to learn through song, to learn while we draw, paint, build; to learn as we act; to learn as we compose the poetry of our lives and construct the stories of who we are and who we want to be" (Diaz & McKenna, 2004, p. 5). Perhaps my recovery is not from being an academic after all, but from a life lived too fast and furious, filled with unsubstantial details and conventional practices. Dewey (1934) suggested that the intellectual and the practical are not the enemies of the aesthetic, but the *submission to convention* in practice and intellectual procedure are. It's as if I was on a high-speed train watching the images speed past in a blur, and suddenly everything slows down and I can see the details of the tall grasses waving above the still marsh water, smell the fresh, sweet air outside, and even hear the song of the red-winged blackbird.

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About the author

Gene Diaz is an international educator and former Fulbright scholar who integrates the creative process with teaching and research. As a visual artist and educator Gene has taught all levels from primary school to graduate students, both inside and outside of classrooms. She completed a PhD at the University of New Orleans in Curriculum, and a BS in Electronics Engineering at San Diego State University. Gene now provides faculty development and program evaluation and lives in Arlington, MA, USA. Contact info: diaz.gene@gmail.com.

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