

TRANSFORMATIVE SOMATIC PRACTICES
AND AUTISTIC POTENTIALS:
AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION

by

Nicholas Walker

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of
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Alfonso Montuori, PhD, Chair
Professor, Transformative Studies

Shoshana Simons, PhD
Professor, Expressive Arts Therapy

Melanie Yergeau, PhD
University of Michigan

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Nicholas Walker
California Institute of Integral Studies, 2019
Alfonso Montuori, PhD, Committee Chair

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ABSTRACT

There is a dearth of research and literature on the use of transformative practices by autistic people as a means of pursuing self-actualization and the realization of positive psychospiritual potentials. In this autoethnographic inquiry I examine my experience as an autistic participant in transformative somatic practices, with a focus on my four decades as a student and teacher of aikido and my two decades as a member of an experiential research group exploring movement-oriented ritual as a tool for accessing the realms of the unconscious and the transpersonal. In reflecting upon my experiences, I aim to derive broader insights regarding the ways in which practices like the ones in which I've engaged can interact with autistic ways of knowing and being, and regarding the use of such practices toward the realization of autistic potentials and the cultivation of psychospiritual wellbeing and self-actualization in autistic people.

The inquiry is grounded a humanistic perspective and in the neurodiversity paradigm, an emergent framework for research and scholarship that foregrounds the voices and experiences of autistics and other members of neurocognitive minorities. Autoethnography, which utilizes the lived experience of the researcher as a foundation for cultural insight, is a methodology particularly well-suited to

this foregrounding of traditionally marginalized voices. In interpreting my experiences and seeking to glean insight from them, I draw upon multiple bodies of theory and literature; I include a literature review that aims at formulating a coherent picture of the overall nature and distinctive qualities of autistic experience, and the subsequent autoethnographic narrative incorporates theories and concepts from the fields of somatic psychology and humanistic psychology.

I conclude the inquiry with reflections on the implications of my narrative with regard to praxis, and with a discussion of possibilities for future research on autistic participation in transformative practices.

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The late Ian J. Grand was a teacher, a mentor, a friend, and my original dissertation chair. Before his passing, he helped to guide and nurture this

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DEDICATION

In Memory of Dr. Ian J. Grand.

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CHAPTER 1: THE INQUIRY

There is a dearth of research and literature on the use of transformative practices by autistic people as a means of pursuing self-actualization and the realization of positive psychospiritual potentials. In this autoethnographic inquiry I examine my experience as an autistic participant in transformative somatic practices, with a focus on my four decades as a student and teacher of aikido and my two decades as a member of an experiential research group exploring movement-oriented ritual as a tool for accessing the realms of the unconscious and the transpersonal. In reflecting upon my experiences, I aim to derive broader insights regarding the ways in which practices like the ones in which I've engaged can interact with autistic ways of knowing and being, and regarding the use of such practices toward the realization of autistic potentials and the cultivation of psychospiritual wellbeing and self-actualization in autistic people.

Transformative Practice

The term *transformative practice*, in its broadest sense, refers to “[any] complex and coherent set of activities that produces positive changes in a person or group” (Murphy, 1992, p. 589). For purposes of this inquiry, I use the term to refer specifically to those forms of practice which are designed to cultivate human capacities for awareness, integration, connection, authenticity, harmony, joy, inner peace and stability, transpersonal experience (Daniels, 2013; Grof, 2000; Walsh & Vaughan, 1993), peak experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990/2008; Maslow, 1968, 1971), flow states (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990/2008, 1993), or expansion of consciousness and sense of self “beyond conventional ego

boundaries” (Hartelius, Rothe, & Roy, 2013, p. 8), and which ultimately aim at facilitating transformations of consciousness toward the realization of positive human psychospiritual potentials—a process which has been variously conceptualized and described in terms such as “self-actualization” (Maslow, 1968; Metzner, 1998; Rowan & Glouberman, 2018), “individuation” (Jung, 1966/1972, 1968/1980; Metzner, 1998), “self-realization” (Metzner, 1998), or psychospiritual growth or evolution (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993; Metzner, 1998).

My focus, then, is on those forms of transformative practice that aim at producing positive psychospiritual transformations in individual practitioners. (Throughout this dissertation, I use the term *psychospiritual* to refer to the combined, overlapping domains of the psychological and the spiritual; I consider the psychological as the domain of the everyday psyche or personality, and the spiritual as the relationship of the psyche to realms of consciousness and experience that transcend the conventional boundaries of the everyday sense of self.) Despite the emphasis on transformation on an individual level, such practices may of course also serve to produce positive changes in groups, since the realization of individual positive psychospiritual potentials includes improvement of individual capacities to treat others well and to interact with grace, compassion, and mindfulness in groups and communities (Leonard, 1999). In fact, in the first of the two forms of transformative practice featured in this inquiry, aikido, practicing mindful and harmonious interaction with others is not only an explicit goal but also the primary means through which individual potentials are cultivated (Holiday, 2013; Leonard, 1999, 2001).

Apart from their being intended to serve the aforementioned purposes, the other defining quality of transformative practices, as I use the term in this inquiry, is that they are fundamentally somatic in nature. In referring to a given practice as *somatic*, what I mean is that the practice implicitly functions on the principle that the organization and functioning of the psyche or self is inextricably entwined with the organization and habitual usage of the body, and that the psyche or self can therefore be worked on and transformed through the intentional practice of certain ways of using the body (Grand, 1978, 1982, 1998, 2012, 2015a, 2015b; Heckler, 1984; Leonard, 2001). This concept is explored in greater detail in Chapter 4 of this dissertation, in the section entitled “Aikido as a Transformative Somatic Practice.” (Note that while the practices featured in this inquiry involve a great deal of physical movement, even a sedentary practice like sitting *zazen* would meet my definition of transformative somatic practice; intentionally sitting still in a specific posture and keeping one’s breath even and unforced for a sustained period is a way of using the body—as is the act of keeping one’s attention focused on one’s breathing, since body awareness is an aspect of body usage.) For purposes of this dissertation, I use the terms *transformative practice* and *transformative somatic practice* interchangeably.

Transformative Practices and Autistic Practitioners

While transformative somatic practices and their benefits have been widely studied and advocated—most notably, in recent decades, within the fields of humanistic psychology and transpersonal psychology (Daniels, 2013)—there has been little work on the specific topic of the use of transformative practices by

autistics, and the ways in which such practices might interact with distinctively autistic ways of knowing and being. The extensive body of work regarding the value of transformative practice toward the realization of positive human potentials has thus far included little or no specific focus on the use of transformative practices toward the realization of positive potentials in autistic people, or on how the potentials, strengths, challenges, and experiences of autistic participants in transformative practices might differ from those of non-autistic participants. There has also been little or no consideration of the potential of autistic practitioners, through their distinctively autistic ways of knowing and being, to offer novel insights into the field of transformative practice or make novel contributions to the practices and communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) in which they participate.

This present autoethnographic inquiry is motivated to a large extent by the hope that an examination of my own experiences as an autistic participant in transformative somatic practices will inspire further inquiries by others into these hitherto underexplored topics.

My Experiences

In modern industrialized nations, where autism is framed as a pathological condition or “disorder” (e.g., Grinker, 2007; Silberman, 2015; Walker, 2012b, 2016; Yergeau, 2018) and there is pervasive discrimination and abuse directed against those who deviate too visibly from neurocognitive sociocultural norms (e.g., S. R. Jones, 2013, 2016; McGuire, 2016; Silberman, 2015; Yergeau, 2018) long-term quality-of-life outcomes for autistics tend to be poor. Both formal

studies and an extensive body of first-hand accounts indicate that unemployment, poverty, homelessness, institutionalization, social isolation, anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, self-injury, suicidality, and exposure to violence and abuse are widespread in the adult autistic population (Cassidy, Bradley, Shaw, & Baron-Cohen, 2018; Howlin, Goode, Hutton, & Rutter, 2004; Nicolaidis, Kripke, & Raymaker, 2014). With the exception of full-on institutionalization, I have experienced all of these things myself. The overwhelmingly adverse experiences of my early life (discussed in Chapter 4 of this dissertation) are on the whole quite similar to those recounted by many other autistics.

Over time, however, the processes of psychospiritual growth, healing, and transformation catalyzed by my long participation in transformative practices have increasingly led me to a condition of overall psychological wellbeing, which continues to develop along lines that are consistent with the processes of psychospiritual development sometimes referred to as self-actualization (Maslow, 1968). The qualities, skills, and ways of knowing and relating that I have cultivated through engagement in transformative practices have helped me to rise above the difficulties and traumas of my early life—troubles that are all too common in modern autistic lives. I have been able to build a life for myself in which I am thriving as an autistic person. Given that I've benefited so greatly from such practices, it seems reasonable to conclude that an in-depth examination of my experience might yield valuable insight into how other autistics might similarly benefit.

Transformative somatic practices have occupied a central role in my life and development. This dissertation focuses on my participation in the two specific systems of transformative practice that have been most central for me: aikido, which I have been practicing continuously since the age of 12 and teaching since my late teens; and the unique form of embodiment work utilized by the experimental theatre group ParaTheatrical ReSearch, of which I was a core member for two decades. These two systems of practice, and my experiences with them, are discussed in depth in Chapters 4 and 5.

Transformative practices are intended to facilitate the realization of positive human potentials, and many such practices have a well-documented history of being effective in this regard (Murphy, 1992). While transformative practices have not traditionally been developed with autistic practitioners specifically in mind, I can think of no existing form of transformative practice—no form of meditation, or yoga, or martial art, for instance—that acts upon its practitioners in a way that might render it an effective tool of transformation for non-autistic people but not for autistic people. To those not burdened by dehumanizing stereotypes about autism, it should come as no great surprise that any form or system of transformative practice that has the potential to substantially benefit non-autistic practitioners could similarly benefit autistic practitioners.

Perhaps even more striking, to my mind, than the ways in which I have benefited from transformative practices, are the ways in which my experiences of participation in transformative practices—and the personal potentials I have been

able to bring to realization through that participation—differ from those of non-autistic participants who have engaged in similar practices. For example, as I discuss in detail in Chapter 4 of this dissertation, my distinctively autistic sensorimotor and cognitive processes have made my subjective experience of aikido training somewhat different from the experiences described by non-autistic aikido practitioners, and have provided me with a distinctive set of challenges and advantages as an aikido student and teacher.

Significance of the Inquiry

I believe that the inquiry which unfolds in this dissertation holds the potential to make novel contributions to the literature and discourses on autism and to the literature and discourses on transformative practice and human potential, to contribute to an emergent cultural paradigm shift in regard to autism, to have positive influence in the realm of professional praxis, and to inspire future research. Each of these areas of potential significance is discussed in turn below.

Literature and Discourse

This inquiry constitutes what I believe to be a valuable and novel contribution to both the discourse on autism, and the discourse on transformative practice and human potential. There is currently no body of literature focused on the interaction of transformative practices with autistic ways of knowing and being, and the use of transformative practices by autistic people as a means of pursuing self-actualization and the realization of higher psychospiritual potentials. The inquiry represents an important step toward beginning to fill this gap in the literature, and thus has the potential to contribute in a significant way to the

discourses dealing with autistic experience and with approaches to fostering the wellbeing of autistic people.

The inquiry also represents an original contribution to the discourses and literature of transpersonal psychology, humanistic psychology, and positive psychology—the realms of psychology in which transformative practices and the realization of higher human potentials tend to be major areas of focus. There has thus far been no substantial discussion of how the frameworks, lenses, and approaches of these particular branches of psychology might be applied to the distinctive needs, experiences, and potentials of the autistic population. Here, again, there is the possibility of making a novel contribution that helps to fill a gap in the existing body of literature.

Fostering a Cultural Shift

This inquiry poses challenges to the paradigm that currently dominates the disciplinary discourses and popular cultural discourses on autism—which I refer to as the “pathology paradigm” (Walker, 2012b, 2016)—and to certain specific bodies of autism-related theory and praxis that are based in that paradigm. In contradicting the assumptions and the flawed and dehumanizing theory and praxis of the pathology paradigm, the inquiry instead aligns itself with and proceeds from the “neurodiversity paradigm” (Walker, 2012b, 2013; Yergeau & Huebner, 2017), which has emerged over the past quarter-century and which has its origins in critiques of the pathology paradigm posed by members of the autistic community (Silberman, 2015; Walker, 2013, 2016; Yergeau, 2018). The nature of these critiques, as well as the respective ontological and epistemological premises

of the pathology paradigm and the neurodiversity paradigm, are discussed in Chapter 2 of this dissertation. Accounts of autistic experience that challenge specific aspects of current mainstream (pathology-oriented) autism-related theory and praxis can be found throughout the dissertation.

The inquiry thus represents a contribution to the growing body of work that aims at fostering a cultural shift from the pathology paradigm to the neurodiversity paradigm (specific pieces of literature that are part of this body of work or that discuss this cultural shift are cited extensively in Chapter 2). Work that promotes and furthers the neurodiversity paradigm while posing critical challenges to the pathology paradigm is already making its way into a number of fields, including but not limited to disability studies, education, social work, gender studies, rhetoric, and comparative literature (e.g., Bakan, 2018; Cowen, 2009; Hillary & Harvey, 2018; Manning, 2013; Manning & Massumi, 2014; Monje, 2015, 2016b; Mooney, 2013; Price, 2011; Savarese, 2010, 2014, 2018; Silberman, 2015; Walker, 2014, 2018; Yergeau, 2015, 2018). Thus far, however, the neurodiversity paradigm has made no significant inroads into such fields as transpersonal psychology and positive psychology—fields that, as previously noted, deal with such topics as self-actualization and the exploration and realization of human psychospiritual potentials. In addition to the potential to make novel contributions to those fields, this inquiry also stands to make a significant contribution to the development and propagation of the emergent neurodiversity paradigm by helping to take it into this new territory.

Influencing Praxis

In conducting and eventually publishing this inquiry, I seek to have an impact not only on the aforementioned realms of literature and discourse, but on praxis as well. Due to the biases and limitations of the current mainstream discourse, therapists and other professionals whose work involves supporting the wellbeing of autistic people tend to conflate autistic wellbeing with autistic people learning to pass for non-autistic (Asasumasu, 2013b; Dawson, 2004; Silberman, 2015; Walker, 2014, 2016; A. Williams, 2018; Yergeau 2018), and tend to be oblivious to any higher potentials of autistic people that might not involve conformity to non-autistic cultural norms of thought and behavior (this issue is explored further in Chapter 2). It is my hope that this inquiry—along with any future work by others that it might inspire—will serve to generate much-needed positive transformations in professional praxis by fostering awareness of higher autistic potentials and by serving as an informative resource for professionals seeking to support autistics in cultivating those potentials. The inquiry also has the potential to influence praxis by serving as an inspiration and resource for teachers and facilitators of various forms of transformative practice who seek to better meet the needs of autistic practitioners, students, and clients.

By encouraging professionals to support autistic participation in transformative practices, and by directly inspiring autistic readers to participate in transformative practices, I expect that over time this inquiry, and the future works by others that it might inspire, may lead to an increase in the number of autistic people who participate in transformative practices. In addition to improving the

lives of these autistics, this may have a secondary long-term effect: due to the autistic proclivity for outside-the-box thinking and innovation (discussed in Chapter 2), autistics who persist in their participation in transformative practices long enough to become teachers and facilitators themselves are likely to make unique contributions to the evolution of the particular forms and systems of transformative practice in which they are engaged.

Inspiring Future Research

In addition to constituting, in its own right, a novel contribution to the literature on autism and the literature on transformative practice and the realization of human potential, I believe that this inquiry has the potential to serve as an inspiration and foundation for further research and exploration along similar lines by other scholars and practitioners. Some possibilities for further research are discussed at the end of Chapter 6.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The early sections of this literature review chapter discuss the epistemological divide between the two major sociocultural paradigms that shape discourse and knowledge production regarding autism: the historically dominant pathology paradigm and the emergent neurodiversity paradigm (Walker, 2012b, 2016). These sections serve to situate the present inquiry within the neurodiversity paradigm, and to clarify how this paradigm informs the epistemology of the inquiry.

In the remaining sections of the chapter, I summarize those aspects of the existing knowledge on autistic experience that constitute essential background information for the inquiry at hand. The total body of existing literature on autism is so vast, sprawling, and multifarious as to defy any reasonable attempt at a concise summation. Most of said literature, however, has little or no direct bearing on the present inquiry. I focus exclusively here on the information regarding autistic ways of knowing and being that might help to establish necessary context for the autoethnographic narrative to follow.

As noted in Chapter 1, this inquiry explores my experience as an autistic person engaged in transformative somatic practice, with emphasis on two specific forms of practice: aikido and the experimental physical theatre work of ParaTheatrical ReSearch. For the sake of flow and readability, I've kept this literature review focused on autism; relevant background information on the nature of transformative somatic work in general, and on aikido and

ParaTheatrical ReSearch in particular, are integrated into the autoethnographic narrative that unfolds in Chapters 4 and 5.

The Pathology Paradigm

The dominant disciplinary discourses on autism, and the theory and praxis that arise from these discourses, are based in what I have termed a pathology paradigm (Walker, 2012b, 2016). Central to this pathology paradigm is the assumption that there is one “right” style of human neurocognitive functioning. Variations in neurocognitive functioning that diverge substantially from socially constructed standards of “normal”—including the variations that constitute autism—are framed within this paradigm as medical pathologies, as deficits, damage, or “disorders” (Armstrong, 2010, 2012; Walker 2012b, 2013, 2016; Yergeau, 2018; Yergeau & Huebner, 2017). “The autistic subject, queer in motion and action and being, has been clinically crafted as a subject in need of disciplining and normalization” (Yergeau, 2018, p. 26).

While extensive neurological variation, innate and otherwise, and associated variation in cognition and behavior, are readily observable among humans (Armstrong, 2010; Edelman, 1987, 1992; Edelman & Tononi, 2000; Sacks, 1995, 2010), the pathology paradigm’s framing of certain constellations of neurological, cognitive, or behavioral characteristics as “disorders” is a social construction rooted in cultural norms and social power relations, not an objective description of a concrete reality (Armstrong, 2010, 2012; K. Gergen, 2015; Marecek & Hare-Mustin, 2009; McGuire, 2016; Walker, 2012b, 2016; Yergeau, 2018; Yergeau & Huebner, 2017). “Ultimately, the decision to regard any set of

behaviours or experiences as a psychological disorder ... is not and cannot be a scientific one. It is a political and moral choice” (Marecek & Hare-Mustin, 2009, pp. 80–81). To classify certain groups of people as disordered or abnormal, as defective or deficient, serves to justify and facilitate the control and subjugation of those groups, their silencing and scapegoating, and sometimes their extermination. These same dynamics have been noted and described time and time again, in recent decades, as playing a key role in the institutionalized oppression of women, indigenous peoples, people of color, disabled people, and LGBTQI people, among others (e.g., P. H. Collins, 2000; Davis, 1995; Gould, 1996; Harding, 2007; Leary & Donnellan, 2012; Marecek & Hare-Mustin, 2009; McCarthy, 1996; Riger, 1992; L. T. Smith, 2012, Walker, 2016).

What is perhaps most remarkable about the pathology paradigm that dominates current disciplinary perspectives on autism is that it has not yet been more widely recognized as being yet another manifestation of this all-too-familiar pattern (Walker, 2016). The framing of autism and other minority neurological configurations as “disorders,” “diseases,” or “medical conditions” begins to lose its aura of scientific authority and objectivity when viewed in this historical context—when one remembers, for instance, that homosexuality was classified as a mental disorder in the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* well into the 1970s (Armstrong, 2010; K. Gergen, 2015; Marecek & Hare-Mustin, 2009); or that in the southern United States, for some years prior to the American Civil War, the desire of slaves to escape from slavery was diagnosed as a medical “disorder” called

drapetomania, “discovered” by a White Southern physician (Marecek & Hare-Mustin, 2009; Whitaker, 2002).

To frame autism as a form of pathology, as a “mental disorder” or “developmental disorder” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Grinker, 2007), a condition of damage or deficit, is to frame autism as being, by definition, incompatible with psychological health and wholeness. Indeed, being autistic is treated within the dominant discourses as being innately defective or less-than-human (McGuire, 2016; Yergeau, 2018; Yergeau & Huebner, 2017). “Autism’s rhetorical function—in genetics, neurology, psychology, philosophy, and more—is to contrast those who are otherwise presumed to be cognitively and thereby humanly whole” (Yergeau, 2018, p. 23). Within the pathology paradigm, there is thus no room for any conception of a healthy and psychologically whole autistic person (Walker, 2012b).

When disciplinary discourses proceed from the assumption that a given state of being is intrinsically pathological, the modes of praxis arising from these discourses will inevitably focus on “treatment” of that state of being. Thus one consequence of the dominance of the pathology paradigm is that when it comes to fostering the wellbeing of autistic people, the extant bodies of disciplinary theory and praxis focus almost exclusively on “treatment” of autism, with the goal of making autistic people into “normal” (i.e., non-autistic) people, or as similar to “normal” non-autistic people as possible (Asasumasu, 2013b; Broderick, 2010; Dawson, 2004; S. R. Jones, 2016; Murray, 2008, 2012; Silberman, 2015; Walker, 2016; A. Williams, 2018; Yergeau, 2018).

When this pervasive disciplinary focus on rendering autistic people indistinguishable from neurotypical people—people whose innate neurocognitive functioning is more or less consistent with societal standards of “normal” (Sinclair, 2012a; Walker, 2013)—is juxtaposed with the focus on the realization of “extraordinary possibilities” (Murphy, 1992, p. 6) found in such fields as humanistic psychology, positive psychology, and transpersonal psychology, and in the literature on transformative practice, a double standard becomes evident in how optimal outcomes for human development are conceived of within the overall realm of disciplinary theory and praxis, and within the prevailing culture. This double standard can be summed up as follows.

- It is widely regarded as a worthy focus of effort and praxis, and as a desirable and praiseworthy end, for a neurotypical person to aspire to the condition of being extraordinary.
- It is widely regarded as a worthy focus of effort and praxis, and as a desirable and praiseworthy end, for an autistic person to aspire to the condition of being ordinary.

It seems reasonable to surmise that this double standard, which stems more or less inevitably from the dominance of the pathology paradigm in discourses on autism, is a substantial contributing factor in the general neglect of the topic of employing transformative practice toward the realization of autistic potential. When there is no room for the concept of a person who is simultaneously autistic and psychologically healthy, there is of course also no room for the concept of a person who is simultaneously autistic and

psychologically or psychospiritually advanced, or simultaneously autistic and self-actualized. And when the very existence of autistic self-actualization or autistic versions of exceptional psychospiritual wellbeing is simply inconceivable within the dominant discourses, there is of course little impetus for inquiry into such phenomena or the processes by which conditions of autistic psychospiritual advancement and self-actualization might be achieved. Thus the paucity of discourse and literature on this topic, which I aim to help remedy in whatever small way I can through my work on this present inquiry.

Humanistic Psychology Versus the Pathology Paradigm

The focus on processes of psychospiritual growth, authenticity, self-actualization, and realization of each individual's unique positive potentials that characterize this inquiry is central to the field of humanistic psychology and to its close offshoots, positive psychology and transpersonal psychology (Daniels, 2013; Rowan & Glouberman, 2018). In exploring how these processes—facilitated by certain forms of transformative practice—can unfold in the life of an autistic person, and in eschewing a pathology-oriented perspective in favor of the position that humanistic psychology's emphasis on each person's essential wholeness and “inherent drive toward self-actualization” (Rowan & Glouberman, 2018, p. 17) is as potentially relevant and applicable to autistic lives and psyches as to anyone else's, my work in this inquiry is explicitly humanistic in its approach, and could be considered to be positioned at least partially within the discourses of humanistic psychology, positive psychology, and transpersonal psychology (although it also draws heavily on the discourse of somatic

psychology, which is rooted more in psychodynamic theories than humanistic).

The humanistic approach, with its nonpathologizing perspective and its embracing of authenticity and unique individual potentials, obviously stands in strong contrast to the pathology paradigm that has always dominated the discourse on autism (Silberman, 2015; Walker 2012b, 2013, 2016; Yergeau, 2018; Yergeau & Huebner, 2017). The pathologization of difference and the veneration and enforcement of normativity that characterize the pathology paradigm are fundamentally at odds with the priorities of humanistic psychology and its offshoots.

Given that humanistic psychology emerged as a significant “third force” in psychology—a powerful alternative and counterpoint to the limitations of the then-dominant psychological paradigms of psychoanalysis and behaviorism—well over half a century ago (Daniels, 2013; Rowan & Glouberman, 2018; Shiraev, 2015), and given that humanistic approaches have been successfully applied to fostering wellbeing in many other populations (e.g., Cain, Keenan, & Rubin, 2016; House, Kalisch, & Maidman, 2018; Schneider, Pierson, & Bugental, 2015), and given also that medicalized approaches, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and behaviorism have all consistently failed at the task of fostering the wellbeing of autistics (Silberman, 2015; Yergeau, 2018), it may seem odd to those unfamiliar with the history of autism-related discourses that the pathology paradigm has retained such dominance in those discourses and that the humanistic perspective I offer in this dissertation isn’t already widespread. While I’m certainly glad to be able to contribute something relatively novel, it seems

worthwhile here to address the question of how it comes to be novel: how is it, in other words, that humanistic psychology has not already played a substantial role in the discourse on autism for the past few decades, challenging the dominance of the pathology paradigm and serving as a widely embraced alternative?

The answer lies in the historical peculiarities and politics of autism-related discourse. The history is complicated, and largely outside the scope of the present inquiry, but I offer a brief summary of the more relevant points here. A far more thorough account can be found in Steve Silberman's (2015) book *NeuroTribes: The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity*.

Autism was “discovered”—that is, first recognized, described, and named by professionals as a distinct phenomenon—in the early 1940s. Hans Asperger, working in Nazi-occupied Vienna, and Leo Kanner, working in Baltimore, made the “discovery” more or less concurrently, but weren't in contact with one another due to being on opposite sides of the World War II battle lines. Asperger, in retrospect, seems to have had a somewhat more accurate understanding of autism, but his study of it came to a sudden and tragic end when his clinic was destroyed in an air raid, and his work subsequently remained obscure until the 1980s, so it was Kanner who initially shaped the discourse (Silberman, 2015).

Kanner was a child psychiatrist whose encounters with autism occurred in the context of concerned parents bringing their autistic children to him and imploring him to figure out what was wrong with them. Given this context and the heavily medicalized psychiatric lens through which he'd been trained and long accustomed to viewing his patients, it was more or less inevitable that Kanner

would immediately frame autism in terms of medical pathology; thus the pathology paradigm was ingrained in the discourse on autism from that discourse's very inception (Silberman, 2015).

In those days, before the rise of humanistic psychology, the pathology-oriented lens was more or less all that the field of psychology had to offer as far as perspectives on divergence from dominant norms or on the struggles of individuals to adapt to the demands and challenges of the world. Psychoanalysis was pathology-oriented, and at that time was the dominant force in psychology and closely entwined with psychiatry—which of course was also heavily pathology-oriented, being generally considered a branch of the medical profession (Shirayev, 2015). Practitioners of behaviorism, the only significant psychological paradigm competing with psychoanalysis back then, hadn't yet taken any interest in autistic children. The psychoanalysts of the mid-20th century catastrophically failed autistics and their families by proclaiming that autism was caused by bad parenting. Kanner, despite having previously reached the correct conclusion that autism was innate, was pressured into going along with this psychoanalytic view, a subsequently further popularized by Bruno Bettelheim in the 1960s (Silberman, 2015).

Bernard Rimland, a psychologist who was himself the father of an autistic child, published a book in 1964 that argued persuasively that autism was neurobiological in nature rather than a form of parent-induced psychosis. Rimland's book was the beginning of the massive backlash against the parent-blaming psychoanalytic narrative, a backlash that involved parents of autistic

children connecting with each other and forming their own networks and advocacy organizations. Unfortunately, Rimland and the many parents he inspired didn't take the position that autism was a natural neurobiological variant and that being autistic was perfectly compatible with being a whole and healthy human who could thrive with the right support; instead they remained entrenched in the pathology paradigm, taking the position that their children were afflicted with a devastating brain disorder and that they, the parents, would save their children by finding out the cause of the affliction and curing them at any cost (Silberman, 2015).

These organizations, primarily run by and for parents, quickly became the most powerful force in the world of autism-related discourse and praxis. After all, it was mostly parents who hired doctors, psychologists, and other professionals, so the success of any professional doing autism-related work largely depended on their ability to market that work to parents of autistic children, who were constantly networking and sharing information and opinions with other parents of autistic children. This parent-driven market has given rise to a multi-billion-dollar industry in quack biomedical "autism treatments," along with a seemingly endless stream of bizarre theories about the causes of autism (Silberman, 2015).

The behaviorists also got into the game in the 1960s, with applied behavior analysis, or ABA, an approach that uses relentless behavioral reinforcement to condition autistic children to be compliant and suppress visible manifestations of autistic embodiment regardless of the impact on their psychological wellbeing. ABA, a particularly extreme expression of the pathology

paradigm's veneration of normativity, found a ready customer base in the new parent-driven organizations and has grown into a multi-billion-dollar industry of its own and become the single most widespread "treatment" for autistic children—despite the fact that many autistics who were subjected to it in childhood assert that it was abusive and left them with lifelong post-traumatic stress symptoms (Asasumasu, 2013b; Bascom, 2012; Dawson, 2004; Kupferstein, 2018; Silberman, 2015; Yergeau 2018).

The dominance of parent-driven autism organizations continues to this day, and this contributes to perpetuating the dominance of the pathology paradigm (Silberman, 2015). The ABA industry, the quack biomedical "treatment" industry, and many other autism-related businesses and practitioners know that their profits depend on parents regarding autism as a terrible pathology that requires treatment, and on parents believing that the only way their kids can ever have good lives is to "recover from autism" and become "normal," so that's the narrative these industries and practitioners promote (McGuire, 2016; Silberman, 2015; Walker, 2016; Yergeau, 2018). The parent-driven organizations themselves also promote this narrative; some of these organizations have become large and profitable ventures in of themselves—large "autism charities" that use the contributions they rake in to pay their executives six-figure salaries, and that have enormous political and financial influence over autism-related research agendas—and the profits of these organizations also depend on promoting the pathology paradigm and a view of autism as a devastating tragedy that destroys the lives of families (McGuire, 2016; Silberman, 2015). Journalists and mass media outlets likewise feed into the

pathology paradigm, partly because the sensationalism of the “tragic pathology” narrative pulls in readers, and partly because the industries, professionals, and parent-driven organizations that promote the pathology paradigm are the sources to which most journalists turn for information and sound bites (McGuire, 2016). Social, political, and economics dynamics such as these serve to maintain the pathology paradigm as the dominant perspective on autism (McGuire, 2016; Silberman, 2015; Walker, 2016; Yergeau, 2018; Yergeau & Huebner, 2017).

The various factors delineated above have contributed to making the pathology paradigm so heavily dominant that humanistic psychology and the perspectives it might offer on autistic lives and experiences has thus far been completely sidelined. Parents don’t bring their autistic children to humanistic psychologists and therapists because humanistic psychologists, of course, aren’t advertising themselves as being in the business of “curing autism” or helping people “recover” from being “abnormal”; such a position, as noted at the beginning of this section, would be fundamentally at odds with the nature of humanistic psychology.

This, then, is why humanistic perspectives and humanistic priorities—priorities such as unconditional acceptance of each person’s unique individuality, and promoting authenticity, creativity, and self-actualization over conformity (Rowan & Glouberman, 2018)—have thus far been almost entirely absent from the dominant discourses on autism. But again, those discourses, the pathology paradigm that shapes and pervades them, and the forms of praxis that pathology-based discourses serve to generate and support, have consistently failed to foster

the wellbeing of autistic people. Humanistic perspectives and priorities, I believe, are exactly the alternative that's needed. The autoethnographic portions of this dissertation that unfold in Chapters 4 and 5 explore how a humanistic focus on authenticity and self-actualization, realized through engagement in transformative practices, served as my own path to wellbeing; my hope is that this autoethnographic examination of my experience will help to inspire a wave of more humanistically oriented autism discourse and praxis.

The Neurodiversity Paradigm

In addition to its foundations in humanistic psychology, this inquiry is grounded in the emergent neurodiversity paradigm (Walker, 2012b), which originated in the autistic activist community in the 1990s as a perspective that offered a liberatory alternative to the pathology paradigm (Silberman, 2015; Walker, 2012b). In the years since its inception, the focus of work within the neurodiversity paradigm has broadened beyond autism to encompass other forms of neurodivergence—that is, other variations in neurocognitive functioning that diverge from hegemonic sociocultural standards of “normal” (Walker, 2013). At the same time, the paradigm has increasingly gained footholds in various realms of scholarship, literature, and praxis (e.g., Armstrong, 2010, 2012; Bakan, 2018; Cowen, 2009; Danforth et al., 2018; Herrera & Perry, 2013; Hillary & Harvey, 2018; S. R. Jones, 2016; Manning, 2013; Manning & Massumi, 2014; Monje, 2015, 2016b; Mooney, 2013; Price, 2011; Savarese, 2010, 2014, 2018; Silberman, 2015; Walker, 2014, 2018; Yergeau, 2015, 2018).

The term *neurodiversity*, a portmanteau of the phrase *neurological diversity*, was coined in the late 1990s by Judy Singer, an autistic sociologist (Silberman, 2015; Singer, 1999) to refer to the diversity of human brains and minds—the near-infinite variation in neurocognitive functioning that occurs within the human species (Armstrong, 2010; Silberman, 2015; Singer, 1999; Walker, 2012b, 2013). Within the neurodiversity paradigm, neurodiversity is understood to be a form of human diversity that is subject to social dynamics similar to those that commonly occur around other forms of human diversity, such as racial diversity, gender diversity, cultural diversity, or diversity of sexual orientation (Sinclair, 2012a; Singer, 1999; Walker, 2012b, 2013, 2014, 2016). These *diversity dynamics* (Thomas, 1996) include the dynamics of social power relations—the dynamics of privilege, oppression, and systemic social inequalities—as well as the dynamics by which diversity, when embraced and well-accommodated, holds the potential to function as a vital social and cultural resource, a rich source of creative synergy and innovation (Armstrong, 2010; Cowen, 2009; Montuori & Fahim, 2004; Manning & Massumi, 2014; Montuori & Stephenson, 2010; Mooney, 2008; Savarese, 2010, 2018; Silberman, 2015; Walker, 2012a, 2013, 2014).

In contrast to the pathology paradigm, the neurodiversity paradigm rejects the idea that there is one “healthy” type of brain, or one “right” style of neurocognitive functioning. Within the neurodiversity paradigm, the concept of a “normal brain” or “normal mind” is recognized as a socioculturally constructed fiction which has no more objective validity than the concept of a “master race”

(Armstrong, 2010; Walker, 2012b). While those whose neurocognitive functioning diverges from dominant sociocultural constructions of “normal” tend to be categorized as “disordered” within the pathology paradigm, the neurodiversity paradigm refers to such people as *neurodivergent* (Walker, 2013). Within the pathology paradigm, groups of neurodivergent people who share specific sets of neurocognitive characteristics—for instance, the characteristics associated with autism or dyslexia—are likely to be identified as fitting within specific diagnostic categories; the neurodiversity paradigm instead identifies such groups as *neurominorities* (Walker, 2012b, 2013), whose shared neurocognitive characteristics and commonalities of experience, like those of racial or sexual minorities, constitute a potential basis for community, cultural identity, shared knowledge, and communal resistance to oppression and hegemonic normativity (Silberman, 2015; Sinclair, 2012a; Walker, 2012b, 2013).

A fundamental premise of the neurodiversity paradigm is that neurodivergent people ought to be entitled to basic human dignity, liberty, empowerment, wellbeing, and social equality (Cowen, 2009; Silberman, 2012, 2015; Walker, 2012b, 2014). A second premise is that diversity among humans—including neurodiversity—is intrinsically a good and valuable thing, a vital thing to preserve and nurture, and a vital asset to human communities because of its capacity to serve as a source of learning, creativity, and innovation (Armstrong, 2010; Silberman, 2015; Walker, 2012b). The recognition of diversity as a source of creative potential is of course widespread outside of the context of the discourse on neurodiversity (e.g., Gregory & Raffanti, 2009; Montuori & Fahim,

2004; Montuori & Stephenson, 2010; Morin, 1999; Slater, 2009; Thomas, 1996).

The neurodiversity paradigm simply extends this appreciation for the value of diversity to encompass the realm of neurodiversity, recognizing that “diversity among brains is just as wonderfully enriching as biodiversity and the diversity among cultures and races” (Armstrong, 2010, p. 3).

A further premise of the neurodiversity paradigm is that the potentials for psychological wellbeing and creativity in neurodivergent people, and the creative potentials of neurodiversity within groups and within society as a whole, can only be realized to the extent that neurodivergent people are empowered to participate in communities and cultures in ways that are in line with their particular neurocognitive styles, needs, and inclinations. Conversely, where their neurocognitive styles, needs, and inclinations are not accepted or accommodated—where the acceptance, inclusion, civil liberties, or safety of neurodivergent people is contingent on their compliance with neurotypical social norms and their continued “passing” for neurotypical—neurodivergent people do not tend to thrive, and communities are deprived of the full benefit of the creative potentials of neurodiversity (Armstrong, 2010, 2012; Asasumasu, 2013b; Cowen, 2009; Dawson, 2004; Mooney, 2008, 2013; Price, 2011; Savarese, 2013a; Silberman, 2015; Walker, 2012a, 2018). The “genius of diversity” (Morin, 1999, p. 95) can be fully realized, in groups or in society as a whole, only when those who deviate from the norms of the majority are empowered to participate without being required to conform (Montuori, 2011; Montuori & Stephenson, 2010;

Thomas, 1996). This has obvious relevance to any inquiry into the realization of autistic potentials.

Unlike the pathology paradigm, the neurodiversity paradigm—with its emphasis on accepting, embracing, and supporting each person’s unique individuality and the creative potentials inherent in that individuality—is highly compatible with the principles and priorities of humanistic psychology discussed in the previous section. I believe there’s a great deal of exciting and productive work that might be generated in the intersection and synthesis of humanistic psychology with the emergent field of neurodiversity; this dissertation represents a first step in that direction, which I hope will provide an impetus for further work by others in both fields.

Epistemology of the Neurodiversity Paradigm

The core epistemological premise of the neurodiversity paradigm, I would argue, is that neurodivergent people themselves are the ultimate authorities and possessors of knowledge regarding their own lives, needs, and experiences (Biklen, 2005; Milton, 2014; Milton & Bracher, 2013; Savarese, 2010, 2014; Sequenzia, 2012; Sutton, 2015; Walker, 2014; Yergeau, 2013, 2015, 2018). The epistemology of the neurodiversity paradigm is thus closely akin to feminist standpoint epistemology, which “‘starts off’ from the everyday lives of oppressed groups rather than from the conceptual frameworks of the dominant social institutions” (Harding, 2007, p. 51), and centers the lived experiences of members of oppressed and marginalized groups as “a primary source of knowledge” (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 10).

Standpoint epistemology recognizes that the experiences of oppressed groups “are not fully captured in existing conceptual frameworks” (Riger, 1992, p. 733), and holds that it is the members of those groups, rather than the academic and professional authorities of the dominant culture, who are truly “the experts at making sense of their world” (Riger, 1992, p. 733). This same epistemological stance is particularly evident in the work of autistic neurodiversity activists, who take the position that autistics themselves are “the only true experts on autism” (Sequenzia, 2012, p. 277). I would therefore suggest that the fundamental epistemology of the neurodiversity paradigm—and certainly of this present inquiry—might best be described as a *neurodivergent standpoint epistemology*.

Given this epistemological foundation, autoethnography conducted by neurodivergent researchers is a method especially well-suited to research conducted within the neurodiversity paradigm (Yergeau, 2015, 2018), since autoethnography starts from stories of the personal lived experiences of the researcher and uses those stories as the basis for more generalized insights into the cultures and cultural practices that form the context in which the stories take place (Chang, 2008; Denzin, 2014; Ellis, 2004; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Indeed, there already exists a substantial body of autoethnographic writing by autistic or otherwise neurodivergent authors that constitutes an essential part of the literature on neurodiversity and neurodivergence (e.g., Antonetta, 2005; Asasumasu, 2013a; Baggs, 2007, 2010; Bascom, 2012; Grace, 2013, 2014; Grandin, 2006, 2008; S. R. Jones, 2013, 2016; Monje, 2012, 2015, 2016a, 2016b; Mooney, 2008; Mukhopadhyay, 2003, 2008, 2015; Prahlad, 2017; Prince-Hughes,

2004, 2005, 2013; Robison, 2008; Rose, 2005; Savarese, 2010; Sequenzia & Grace, 2015; Tammet, 2007, 2009; Walker, 2015a, 2018; D. Williams, 1999; Yergeau, 2012, 2013, 2015, 2018). Autistic scholars have coined such terms as “autie-ethnography” (Rose, 2005; Yergeau, 2013, 2015, 2018) and “autistethnography” (Grace, 2014, Yergeau 2015, 2018) to describe the growing genre of autistic autoethnography, to which the present inquiry constitutes what I hope will be a useful contribution. The particular value of this emergent genre as a tool for transforming disciplinary discourses on autism, and as a tool of resistance and liberation for the autistic community, is discussed at greater length in Chapter 3, in the section entitled, “The Importance of Autoethnography in Autism Research.”

Autism and Autistic Selfhood

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, the bulk of the vast body of literature on autism falls outside the scope of the present inquiry. An extensive review of the history of professional and public misconceptions, stereotypes, and knowledge production regarding autism, for instance, or of the many studies and theories regarding autism’s etiology or neurobiology that have been generated by those working within the pathology paradigm, would fill hundreds of pages and have little relevance to the topic at hand. It does, however, seem both relevant and necessary here to attempt a basic description of autism as a phenomenon—a summary of essential facts that seem at this time to be well-supported by research and consistent with firsthand accounts of the lived experience of autistics.

Autism is a neurobiological variant, a style of neurocognitive functioning found in a sizeable minority within the global human population. Despite alarmist rhetoric in the mass media about an “autism epidemic” (McGuire, 2016; Silberman 2015), there is no evidence that the prevalence of autism within the human population has actually increased in recent decades—only that awareness, recognition, and diagnosis of autism have increased (Grinker, 2007; Silberman, 2015). Although researchers, journalists, hucksters, and others operating within the pathology paradigm have generated numerous theories regarding “causes” of autism—some quite bizarre, and some unfortunately persistent—current evidence points overwhelmingly toward autism being genetic in origin (Grinker, 2007; Silberman, 2015).

A thorough review of history also vindicates Asperger’s notion that autistic people have always been part of the human community, though they have often been relegated to the margins of society. ... However, society insists on framing autism as a contemporary aberration—the unique disorder of our uniquely disordered times—caused by some tragic convergence of genetic predisposition and risk factors hidden somewhere in the toxic modern world. ...

Our DNA tells a different story. In recent years, researchers have determined that most cases of autism are not rooted in rare *de novo* mutations but in very old genes that are shared widely in the general population while being concentrated more in certain families than others. Whatever autism is, it is not a unique product of modern civilization. It is a strange gift from our deep past, passed down through millions of years of evolution. (Silberman, 2015, pp. 469–470)

In the terminology of the neurodiversity paradigm, a neurological variant such as autism is sometimes referred to as a *neurotype* (Chown, 2014; Walker, 2012b). A common analogy made in writings on neurodiversity is that a person’s neurotype is the neurocognitive equivalent of a computer’s operating system, and

autistics have different operating systems from neurotypicals (e.g., Asasumasu, 2011; Faherty, 2000; Silberman, 2015, Walker, 2015b).

Since autism is like an operating system, you cannot separate it from who I am and how I work. Once you install Linux on your [computer]. ... It's a Linux computer. It works differently than a Windows computer or a Mac, for example. It's not broken, it's different. (Asasumasu, 2011, para. 5)

While analogies comparing human brains to computers are far from perfect (Armstrong, 2010), this “operating system” analogy is both apt and useful insofar as it serves to convey two crucial points about autism. The first point is that autistic minds process information differently from non-autistic minds, and autistic people thus have a fundamentally different experience of reality than non-autistic people (e.g., Baggs, 2007, 2010; Bogdashina, 2010, 2013, 2016; Grandin, 2006, 2008; Manning, 2013; Manning & Massumi, 2014; K. Markram & Markram, 2010; Markram, Rinaldi, & Markram, 2007; Mukhopadhyay, 2003, 2008, 2015; Prahlad, 2017; Prince-Hughes, 2004, 2013; Savarese, 2010, 2018; Tammet, 2007, 2009; Walker, 2015a, 2015b, 2018; D. Williams, 1998, 1999; Yergeau, 2013, 2018). The nature of this difference is elaborated upon in detail in the remaining sections of this chapter. The second point is that autism pervasively informs an autistic person’s developmental trajectory, consciousness, and experience, beginning *in utero* and continuing throughout the lifespan (Bogdashina, 2010, 2016; K. Markram & Markram, 2010; Markram et al., 2007). “Autism is core to my very being. It’s how I sense, interact with others, and process information” (Yergeau, 2018, p. 21). Autism is thus integral to and inseparable from an autistic person’s lived experience and embodied personhood (Gross, 2012; Leary & Donnellan, 2012; Manning & Massumi, 2014; Savarese,

2010; Silberman, 2015; Sinclair, 2012b; Walker, 2012a, 2018; Yergeau, 2013, 2018).

It is in recognition of the integral and pervasive role of autism in the development and selfhood of autistic people, and also in rejection of the harmful praxes aimed at “curing” autism that have resulted from the rhetorical construction of autism as “an entity separable from autistic people” (Gross, 2012, p. 259), that advocates of the neurodiversity paradigm have come to intentionally eschew “person first” phrasing such as “person with autism” in favor of “identity first” phrasing such as “autistic person” (e.g., Asasumasu, 2011; Gernsbacher, 2007; Gross, 2012; Sinclair, 2012b; Walker, 2012b). In the present inquiry, as is no doubt obvious by now, I have opted to use the identity first construction—“autistic people,” or simply “autistic(s)” as a noun—to indicate that I am intentionally situating my work within the neurodiversity paradigm, and also to indicate that the implied view of autism as integral to and inseparable from autistic selfhood is consistent with my own lived experience.

Autistic Brains as Rhetorical Props and Pinball Machines

The next few sections of this chapter are devoted to the discussion of the distinctively autistic modes of perception, cognition, and embodiment that form the foundation of autistic lived experience. In approaching such a discussion, it seems useful to at least briefly reference the neurobiological dynamics associated with these distinctive modes of knowing and being. In incorporating even the briefest of references to autistic neurobiology into my narrative, however, I feel it necessary to offer certain disclaimers.

In *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness*, arguably the definitive critical analysis of the rhetorical construction of autism discourses, Melanie Yergeau (2018) examines autism as “a constellation of stories” (p. 20), and notes the ways in which a focus on neurobiology in these stories has served to “author autistic people as victim-captives of a faulty neurology, as rhetorically degraded and rhetorically suspect” (p. 3):

Autism’s essence, if you will, has been clinically identified as a disorder that prevents individuals from exercising free will and precludes them from accessing self-knowledge and knowledge of human others. Its subjects are not subjects in the agentive sense of the word, but are rather passively subject to the motions of brains and dermis gone awry. ...

Of course, framing autism as a neurological involuntarity is a false construct. After all, does anyone really choose their neurology? And yet, even though neurotypicality is as much an involuntarity as is ... neurodivergence, the construct of involuntarity is culturally inscribed into autism as a condition. Autistics wrench and scream and rock their bodies, and they have no choice; they have no agency; they project little or no narrativistic purpose. (p. 8)

These narratives of involuntarity, which frame autistic people not as people but as clusters of symptoms and behaviors mechanistically attributable to specific quirks of neurobiology, constitute a “project of dehumanization” (Yergeau, 2018, p. 9). There is, as Yergeau (2018) points out in the passage quoted above, neither evidence nor logic to support the idea that the clusters of symptoms and behaviors associated with neurotypicality or lack-of-autism are any less the involuntary manifestations of neurobiology than those associated with autism—it’s just that because of social power differentials, autistics are the ones under the microscope while neurotypicals are generally the ones doing the microscope-gazing and selecting the lens. The project of “neuroreductionism” (Manning & Massumi, 2014), of attempting to mechanistically reduce autistic

lives, agency, and experience—or anyone’s life, agency, or experience—to effects of neurobiological causes, is innately a project

contrived with and for the pathological—which is to say that it is guided by an a priori commitment to a presupposed, quantifiable, base-state distinction between the normal and the pathological. No matter what kind of philosophical calisthenics are performed around it, the neuro remains profoundly *neurotypical*. (p. 21)

In arguing for recognition of the rhetorical agency of autistics and for the value and distinctive qualities of autistic narratives and autistic rhetorics, Yergeau (2018) asks: “How might an autistic rhetoric move beyond neurotypical obsession with the brain?” (p. 59). Being a devoted practitioner of aikido, I’m personally inclined to follow up this excellent question with another one: How might I make use of the neurotypical obsession with the autistic brain to my rhetorical advantage—as an aikido practitioner makes use of the power of an attacker—by appropriating the neurotypical discourse on autistic neurobiology and repurposing it to serve as a prop for an autistethnographic narrative of lived autistic experience?

So the first disclaimer I offer is that the brief discussion of autistic neurobiological functioning that concludes this present section, and all other references to autistic neurology in the subsequent sections of this chapter or elsewhere in this dissertation, are inserted purely as rhetorical devices—convenient and strategically selected props to support the story I’m telling about lived autistic experience. While these neurobiological explanations are based in current neuroscientific research and might well be valid, the validity of my descriptions of autistic modes of perception, cognition, embodiment, and

experience in no way hinge upon them. My descriptions of these experiential phenomena are based in first-hand accounts of autistic experience and analyses of such accounts by other researchers, and in a lifetime of being autistic myself, and in years of knowing and comparing notes with a great many fellow autistics; these sources of phenomenological and autistethnographic data on the nature of autistic experience remain valid even if future neuroscientific research should happen to disprove or render obsolete the theories I cite about the associated neurobiological dynamics. In other words, I'm intentionally reversing the conventional pattern of scientific neurotypical discourses on autism by foregrounding lived autistic experience and treating autistic accounts as the most valid data on that experience, while treating neuroscientific explanations for said experience as speculations that can best be put to use as interesting embellishments and rhetorical props.

My second disclaimer is that the tendency among neurotypical researchers to take positions of scientific certitude when it comes to their claims regarding autistic neurobiology, while viewing autistics as unreliable narrators who are “rhetorically degraded and rhetorically suspect” (Yergeau, 2018, p. 3), turns out upon examination of the literature to be rather backward. First-hand accounts of autistic perceptual experience, taken in the aggregate, form a remarkably consistent picture (Bogdashina, 2010, 2016; Manning, 2013), while the extensive body of research on autistic neuroanatomy, by ironic contrast, has thus far been wildly varied and inconsistent in its findings (Jumah, Ghannam, Jaber, Adeeb, & Tubbs, 2016).

The particular perspective on autistic neurobiology that I've incorporated into this dissertation is the one I find by far the most convincing as an explanation of the lived experience of autistic perception, cognition, and embodiment, but it is only one perspective in a body of neuroscientific (or neuroscientific) autism literature full of contradictions and “substantial discrepancy” (Jumah et al., 2016, p. 454). I include this perspective on autistic neurobiology not because I'm convinced of its objective scientific validity, but because, again, it serves my narrative purposes (a review of the many alternate neuroscientific perspectives that are less compelling as explanations of self-reported autistic experience would fall outside the scope of the present inquiry).

According to the particular theory of autistic neurocognitive functioning that I favor for its consistency with autistic accounts of lived autistic experience, a primary distinguishing feature of autistic neurobiology appears to be that the cerebral cortex of an autistic brain contains a higher volume and density of neurons than that of a non-autistic brain (Bogdashina, 2010, 2016; Casanova, Buxhoeveden, & Brown, 2002). Current evidence indicates that in the autistic brain, the groupings of neurons that serve as “the basic units of cortical functioning” (Bogdashina, 2010, p. 58), often referred to as *minicolumns* (Buxhoeveden & Casanova, 2002; Mountcastle, 1997), are more numerous, closer together, and less insulated from one another (Bogdashina, 2010, 2016; Casanova et al., 2002). This dense proliferation of minicolumns produces a condition of “hyperconnectivity” (Bogdashina, 2010, p. 59), in which cortical neurons in the autistic brain fire more readily and “form connections with other neurons more

readily” (p. 59) than cortical neurons in the non-autistic, and in which information being transmitted through cortical minicolumns in the autistic brain tends to jump or “overflow” (p. 59) to other adjacent minicolumns:

The comparative research of minicolumns in the brains of non-autistic and autistic individuals has revealed that in the non-autistic neocortex, information is transmitted through the core of the minicolumn and is prevented from activating neighboring units by surrounding inhibitory fibres. Minicolumns in autism, however, are smaller, more numerous and have an abnormal structure, so stimuli are no longer contained within them but rather overflow to adjacent units thus creating an amplifier effect. (p. 29)

This hyperconnectivity gives the autistic brain “a higher than normal capacity for processing information” (Bogdashina, 2016, p. 30), meaning that any given stimulus is likely to generate a greater, more intense, and less predictable overall effect within the autistic brain than within the neurotypical brain (Bogdashina, 2010, 2016; K. Markram & Markram, 2010; Markram et al., 2007).

A useful analogy might be to compare brains to pinball machines: the autistic brain is like a pinball machine in which the playfield contains a much-greater-than-typical profusion of bumpers, targets, kickers, spinners, and other such features, so that each time a ball goes shooting into play it’s likely to bounce around a lot more than it would on a typical machine, scoring more points and triggering more sound effects and flashing lights.

Of all the manifold neuroscientific findings and theories on autistic neurobiology, this theory of the hyperconnectivity of cortical neurons in the autistic brain—which I’ve personally taken to thinking of as the “pinball” theory—seems to me the most plausible and evidence-supported neurobiological explanation so far for the distinctive characteristics of autistic perception and

embodiment discussed in the following sections. It's certainly the best explanation I've encountered for the high incidence of synesthesia reported by autistics (e.g., Bogdashina, 2010, 2013, 2016; J. Jones & Yontz, 2015; Manning, 2013; Mukhopadhyay, 2003, 2008, 2015; Prahlad, 2017; Prince-Hughes, 2013; Savarese, 2010; 2018; Sequenzia, 2015a, 2015b; Tammet, 2007, 2009; Walker, 2015a, 2018; D. Williams, 1998, 1999). (Synesthesia is a form of perceptual experience in which sensory phenomena register and reverberate across multiple sensory channels in non-standard ways, such as sounds or smells being experienced as having textures or colors; the richly and intensely synesthetic nature of my own perceptual experience is discussed at various points in Chapter 4 of this dissertation.)

Ultimately, though, the existence of any such plausible explanation should in no way be taken as a validation of any neuroreductionist project that seeks to frame autism as a state of “neurological involuntarity” (Yergeau, 2018, p. 8), or autistic modes of being and experience as mere “symptoms” of neurobiology. The pinball theory, or any other attempt at describing and explaining the distinguishing features of autistic neurology, “only has explanatory value to the extent to which the composing of experience can be reduced to its physical pole” (Manning & Massumi, 2014, pp. 21–22). For purposes of this present inquiry and of any inquiry into autistic psychological or psychospiritual wellbeing and development, autism is most usefully understood not as a cluster of neurobiological traits and mechanisms but as a lived experience grounded in certain distinctive modes of perception and embodiment.

Autistic Perception

Human beings, like all other living creatures, live in constant interaction with an ever-changing field of sensory information. The human brain is continually engaged in filtering and sorting this field of information: selecting what gets consciously noticed, and organizing the field into a perceived world of discrete and coherent objects and sensations according to a highly complex system of ingrained schemata that are developed beginning in early infancy (Bogdashina, 2010, 2016; Combs, 2009; Damasio, 2010; Manning, 2013; Piaget, 1953; Stern, 1977/2002, 1985). The infant's initial experience of the field of sensory information, prior to the development of at least some basic organizing schemata, has been famously described by William James (1890/2007) as “one great blooming, buzzing confusion” (p. 488).

The basic processes of filtering, sorting, and organizing the field of sensory information tend to become more or less fully automatic, unconscious, and effectively instantaneous for neurotypical individuals by late infancy (Manning, 2013; Piaget, 1953; Stern, 1977/2002, 1985). Due most likely to the neurobiological factors discussed in the previous section, however, the autistic experience of the sensory field is far more intense, chaotic, and dense with information than the neurotypical experience—and consequently far more difficult to filter, sort, and organize. In the vivid metaphor of autistic autoethnographer Dawn Prince-Hughes (2013), “being autistic is simply being human—but without the skin” (p. 19). Thus, for autistics, organizing the field of sensory information without being overwhelmed by its sheer intensity and

complexity can represent an ongoing, lifelong challenge (Biklen, 2005; Bogdashina, 2010, 2016; Leary & Donnellan, 2012; Manning, 2013, 2016; K. Markram & Markram, 2010; Markram et al., 2007; Mottron, Dawson, Soulières, Hubert, & Burack, 2006; Mukhopadhyay, 2003, 2008; Walker, 2018; D. Williams, 1998).

Some of the essential schemata by which neurotypical people learn to organize their experience during the early years of development may take considerably longer for some autistic people to master, and mastery of certain organizing schemata may prove entirely unattainable for some autistic people (Biklen, 2005; Bogdashina, 2010, 2016; Leary & Donnellan, 2012; Mottron et al., 2006; Mukhopadhyay, 2008; D. Williams, 1998).

Superiority of perceptual flow of information ... [leads] to an atypical relationship between high and low order cognitive processes in autism, by making perceptual processes more difficult to control and more disruptive to the development of other behaviors and abilities. (Mottron et al., 2006, p. 28)

Ultimately, the process of organizing the informational field—the process of transforming the great blooming, buzzing confusion into a coherent world of discrete objects and sensations—never becomes as fully automatic for an autistic person as it does for the neurotypical (Manning, 2013, 2016; Manning & Massumi, 2014; Walker, 2018; D. Williams, 1998). “For autistics ... the world seems to emerge directly in all of its relational complexity with few immediate buffers to compartmentalize it” (Manning, 2013, p. 153).

The process of organizing or compartmentalizing the informational field into discrete, specific, and nameable chunks—objects, concepts, sensations, and

so on—has been described by autistic author Anne Corwin as *chunking* (as cited in Manning, 2013, p. 219). The autistic experience of perceiving the blooming, buzzing, raw, unbuffered glory of the informational field without the automatic imposition of chunking—or the experience of perceiving the field in liminal states of flux between chunked and un-chunked—has been referred to as “field perception” (Massumi, 2013) or “gestalt perception” (Bogdashina, 2010, 2016). “Where neurotypical perception tends to quickly parse the object from the field of resonance, autistic perception tends to dwell in the shaping” (Manning, 2013, p. 177). First-person narratives by autistic authors abound with attempts to describe these modes of perception, and to describe the experience of “dwelling in the shaping”—the experience of the complex processes and perceptual phenomena that occur when chunking is not entirely automatic (e.g., Baggs, 2007, 2010; Biklen, 2005; Ford, 2010; Grandin, 2008; Manning, 2013, 2016; Manning & Massumi, 2014; Mukhopadhyay, 2008, 2015; Prahlad, 2017; Prince-Hughes, 2004; Tammet, 2007, 2009; Walker, 2012a, 2015a, 2015b, 2018; D. Williams, 1998, 1999). Overall, accounts convey a view of autism as “a divergent way of perceiving, an interbodily, beyond-the-skin experiential of detail and overwhelm and intricacy” (Yergeau, 2018, p. 56).

A growing body of evidence, including many first-person accounts by autistics, seems to indicate that this mode of unbuffered perception, this “dwell[ing] in the shaping” (Manning, 2013, p. 177), constitutes the fundamental distinguishing quality of autistic perception and autistic experience. The perceptual factors delineated above seem to be at the root of the many and various

distinctive traits associated with autism (Bogdashina, 2010, 2013, 2016; Danforth & Walker, 2014; Ford, 2010; Leary & Donnellan, 2012; Manning, 2013; K. Markram & Markram, 2010; Markram et al., 2007; Mottron et al., 2006; Savarese, 2014; Tammet, 2009; Torres & Whyatt, 2018; Walker, 2015b, 2018; D. Williams, 1998).

The bulk of the misguided theories and harmful practices around autism that have been generated within the pathology paradigm seem to originate in misinterpretations of the surface behaviors of autistics, based in a lack of awareness of these factors and lack of understanding of subjective autistic experience (Biklen, 2005; Bogdashina, 2010, 2016; Grandin, 2008; Leary & Donnellan, 2012; Manning, 2013; K. Markram & Markram, 2010; Markram et al., 2007; Smukler, 2005; Walker, 2018; Yergeau, 2018). “So many professionals ... just can’t imagine that an alternate sensory reality exists if they have not experienced it personally” (Grandin, 2008, p. 58).

Most notably, autism has been widely misconstrued as being primarily a set of deficits in the capacity for social interaction. Autistics do in fact face substantial challenges when it comes to social interaction, but these challenges originate primarily as a side effect of their sensory experience. A great deal of a young autistic person’s attention in infancy and childhood must necessarily be occupied by the complicated process of learning to parse and navigate the sensory field. Current evidence seems to support the theory that children are born with a certain instinctual predisposition toward experiencing stimuli that are specifically social—such as faces and facial expressions, or human voices—as “having a

higher degree of salience” (Klin, Jones, Schultz, & Volkmar, 2003, p. 350) than other sensory information that might be competing for their attention. This “topology of salience” (p. 349) supports social adaptation and the rapid early acquisition of social cognitive skills such as the ability to read and emulate social cues (Klin et al., 2003). In autistic children, however, the chaos, intensity, and extreme complexity of autistic sensory experience seems to overwhelm this socially oriented topology of salience to varying degrees—essentially reducing the amount of cognitive “bandwidth” that young autistics have available for the developmental task of picking up on and internalizing all of the social cues and myriad cultural norms and subtleties of social performance and interaction that non-autistic children internalize from an early age. Then, because they can’t perform non-autistic norms of social interaction well enough to blend in, autistics tend to be rejected socially by non-autistic people from an early age, which deprives autistics of opportunities for positive social interaction, which in turn further compounds the initial challenges to social development (Bogdashina, 2010, 2016; Danforth & Walker, 2014; Klin et al., 2003; Manning, 2013; K. Markram & Markram, 2010; Walker, 2015b, 2018).

The resulting difficulties in social interaction, frequently lifelong, are incorrectly assumed to be the core defining feature of autism—when in fact they’re merely a by-product of autistics having to devote more cognitive energy than non-autistics to the processing of sensory experience, particularly during key early developmental years, combined with the effects of a long-term social alienation that stems less from autistic deficits in social potential and more from

neurotypical deficits in tolerating difference (Danforth & Walker, 2014; Manning, 2013; Savarese, 2014; Walker, 2015b 2018).

Perhaps the most significant example—and certainly the most ironic example—of poor understanding of autistic subjectivity leading to poor autism-related theory is the widespread mischaracterization of autistic people as being deficient in empathy or in theory of mind (e.g., Baron-Cohen, 1987, 1989, 1997; Baron-Cohen, Leslie, & Frith, 1985; Frith, 2003; Frith & Happé, 1999). Critics of the “theory of mind deficit” view of autism have persuasively argued and demonstrated that this theory is based in flawed research methods, flawed interpretations of data, cultural bias and prejudice, circular logic, and highly dubious assumptions (e.g., Baggs, 2016; Cohen-Rottenberg, 2012; Gernsbacher & Frymiare, 2005; Milton, 2012; Smukler, 2005; Yergeau 2013, 2015, 2018; Yergeau & Huebner, 2017); that it is inconsistent with both neuroscientific evidence (Gernsbacher & Frymiare, 2005; K. Markram & Markram, 2010) and the lived experiences of autistic people (Baggs, 2016; Manning, 2013; Manning & Massumi, 2014; Savarese, 2014, 2018; Smukler, 2005; Yergeau 2013, 2015, 2018; Yergeau & Huebner, 2017); and that rather than a sound and objective analysis of available data it reflects a social power imbalance in which the reciprocal communication challenges that arise between two groups of people who think differently from one another—in this case, neurotypical people and autistic people—are blamed entirely on the alleged deficits of the group that holds less social power (Danforth & Walker, 2014; Milton, 2012; Smukler, 2005; Walker, 2012b, 2015b; Yergeau, 2015, 2018; Yergeau & Huebner, 2017).

The genesis and persistence of this multiply flawed “theory of mind deficit” canard may be traced in large part to the fact that many neurotypical researchers and putative “autism experts” themselves possess “a limited theory of other minds—one that privileges neurotypical minds and ignores all others” (Yergeau & Huebner, 2017, p. 274), but is no doubt also rooted in and perpetuated by the many encounters between autistic people and non-autistic researchers or professionals in which

the autistic does not manage to convey the complexity of his or her perception to the attending psychologist, neuroscientist, medical doctor, or academic, within a controlled environment that in many cases does not even begin to attend to his or her needs. (Manning, 2013, p. 150)

The various externally observable traits and behaviors commonly associated with autism are readily understandable by non-autistic persons only when properly illuminated by an understanding of autistic perception and experience:

What is sidestepped in the pathologization of autism as mindblindness by the likes of Baron-Cohen is the different modality of relational emphasis. ... It’s not that [the autistic person] is suffering from a lack of relation, it’s that he is not interacting according to standard ... expectations, consumed as he is by the ecology of what is unfolding around him. (Manning, 2013, p. 152)

Autistic modes of being and acting in the world make perfect sense in the context of autistic experiences of the world (Bogdashina, 2010, 2016; Danforth & Walker, 2014; Leary & Donnellan, 2012; Manning, 2013; K. Markram & Markram, 2010; Walker, 2018; D. Williams, 1998). While an extensive list of examples would fall outside the scope of this present work, the following brief one serves as a vivid illustration of the point.

The well-known tendency of autistic children to play with toys in ways that look quite different from the play of neurotypical children—for instance, by disassembling them, examining their individual parts, exploring them with all senses, lining them up in rows, or sorting them in various ways—has baffled many a parent of many an autistic child, has been widely misinterpreted by non-autistic theorists as being somehow indicative of an impaired or absent capacity for imagination or symbolic thought (e.g., Baron-Cohen, 1987), and has often been “listed as one of the many woeful autism signs to which parents should remain on high alert” (Yergeau, 2018, p. 72). A first-person account by an autistic person, however, reveals that these characteristically autistic forms of play represent an effective approach to chunking the materials of play in the absence of the more rapid and automatic chunking process that characterizes the postinfancy cognitive functioning of neurotypical children—an approach by which the autistic child experiments to gain familiarity with the attributes and potentials of the raw materials, as a healthy and necessary step toward being able to effectively utilize those materials in other forms of creative play:

I was given a doll’s house when I was seven. I loved “it”—the bright red smooth glossy contoured triangular form with the great rih-rih noise made by running the back of the hand over the plastic hollow form which was “the roof” and the smooth woody tock-tock, slot together hard square white surfaces which were the walls and the collection of plastic chewable forms of various colours, contours and pliability which were the dolls and furniture. I spent my time disassembling the component parts to create the perfection of unmuddied water. The roof, walls, furniture and dolls were kept separate. Later, I used the walls to keep various categories of furniture separate and the dolls all stayed in one category separate from the furniture. Only once I’d unmuddied all the forms could I explore the various structured ways in which the forms could justifiably become muddied according to purpose. (D. Williams, 1998, p. 20)

Benefits of Autistic Perception

The pathology paradigm tends to frame the difficulties faced by autistics as being inherent to autism, and thus as evidence in support of a pathology-and-deficit-oriented perspective on autism and an imperative to “treat” or “cure” autism. The neurodiversity paradigm, on the other hand, tends to emphasize critical examination of the ways in which the difficulties faced by autistics largely have their origins in the specific context of a noisy, fast-paced, neurotypical-dominated society that is actively intolerant of needs, experiences, ways of knowing, relational styles, modes of expression and embodiment, and developmental timelines and trajectories that deviate from neurotypical norms—a perspective that supports the cultivation of societal acceptance and accommodation of neurodivergence as the optimal primary solution to such difficulties (e.g., Armstrong, 2010, 2012; Broderick & Ne’eman, 2008; Leary & Donnellan, 2012; Manning, 2013; Prince-Hughes, 2004; Savarese, 2013a, 2014; Silberman, 2012, 2015; Walker, 2012b, 2012b). Regardless of these essential paradigmatic distinctions, the literature on autism within both paradigms has tended to focus primarily on difficulties of one kind or another, and on various approaches to overcoming or alleviating said difficulties (Cowen, 2009; Silberman, 2015).

Recently, however, there has also emerged a small but growing trend—by no means incompatible with the agenda of alleviating autistic difficulties—toward increased attention to the potential benefits of autistic perception (e.g., Armstrong, 2010, 2012; Cowen, 2009; Manning, 2013, 2016; Manning & Massumi, 2014;

Mottron et al., 2006; Prince-Hughes, 2013; Savarese, 2014, 2018; Silberman, 2015; Stillman, 2006; Tammet, 2007, 2009; Walker, 2012a, 2015a). In 1938, in the first public lecture on autism ever delivered, Hans Asperger defied popular eugenicist dogma and risked the wrath of the Nazi regime when he told a Vienna audience that the challenges and the “special gifts” (as quoted in Silberman, 2015, pp. 128–129) of autism were “mutually conditional, arising from the same source” (pp. 128–129). Current evidence indicates that Asperger was quite correct. As previously noted, the various challenges commonly faced by autistic people are more readily comprehended when one begins from an understanding of the rich chaos and intensity of the autistic experience of the sensory field, and of how this experience is more difficult to organize or chunk than neurotypical experience. It is precisely these same distinctive qualities of autistic experience that are the source of the benefits and positive potentials of autistic perception (Biklen, 2005; Bogdashina, 2010, 2013; Manning, 2013, 2016; Manning & Massumi, 2014; Mottron et al., 2006; Prince-Hughes, 2004, 2013; Savarese, 2010, 2013a, 2014, 2018; Selfe, 1977, 1983; Tammet, 2007, 2009; Walker, 2015a; D. Williams, 1998).

Much of autistic experience occurs in the liminal zone in between the unbuffered experience of the complexity of the informational field and the chunking of that experience in accordance with learned schemata. Challenging as it can be to navigate—particularly in social contexts in which near-instantaneous chunking and conformity with normative schemata are expected and demanded—

this liminal zone is a space rich with the potential for extraordinary insight and perceptual magic.

All perception involves chunking, but what autistics have access to that is usually backgrounded for neurotypicals is the direct experience of the relational field's morphing into objects and subjects. Experientially speaking, there is never—for anyone—the direct apprehension of an object or subject. What we perceive is always first a relational field. It is a key contribution of Whitehead to have created a whole philosophical vocabulary of process to make this clear. Still, given the quickness of the morphing from the relational field into the objects and subjects of our perceptions, many of us neurotypicals feel as though the world is “pre-chunked” into species, into bodies and individuals. This is the shortcoming, as autistics might say, of neurotypical perception (that we are simply too quick to chunk), and it is certainly one of the things that makes many autistics feel lost in a world overtaken by normpaths.

The foregrounding of the world in its morphability as experienced in autistic perception opens experience to a level of relation with the world which is rare. This level of relation is an ecological attunement to the multiplicity that is life-living, for it attends, always, to the dynamic details of a process: autistic perception never begins with the general attribute, never assumes integration over complexity. It prehends, always, from the middle, with an active regard for the emergent field's environmentality. In the register of autistic perception, the world is experienced as an ecology of practices. This results in a mode of existence that moves not from self to self, or self to other, but from dynamic constellation to dynamic constellation. (Manning, 2013, p. 219)

The magic that can emerge within the liminal zone of “morphability” (Manning, 2013, p. 219) or “dwell[ing] in the shaping” (p. 177) includes the remarkable feats of rapid nonlinear information processing commonly referred to as “savant” abilities, but is by no means limited to such rare and dramatic manifestations (Bogdashina, 2010, 2013; Tammet, 2007, 2009). Autism “has cognitive strengths with or without savant-like abilities; non-savant autistics tap into the same sources of cognitive advantage as do the savants, albeit in less extreme form” (Cowen, 2009, p. 19). One example is the ability of some autistic artists to draw scenes and objects from memory with an exceptionally high level

of accurate detail, even in early childhood; the most plausible explanation for this phenomenon that has been advanced is that while neurotypical children draw based on “their own internalised schema for objects” (Snyder & Thomas, 1997, p. 93), autistic children—and some adult autistic artists—“make no assumptions about what is to be seen in their environment ... and consequently perceive all details” (p. 93) without filtering their perceptions through the automatic imposition of any “visual or linguistic schema” (p. 93).

Without the hypothesized domination of language and verbal mediation in the early years when graphic competence was acquired, these subjects were able to attend to the spatial characteristics of their optic array and to represent these aspects in their drawing. ... These children therefore have a more direct access to visual imagery in the sense that their drawings are not so strongly “contaminated” by the usual “designating and naming” properties of normal children’s drawings. (Selfe, 1983, p. 201)

Perceptual engagement with “the world in its morphability” (Manning, 2013, p. 219)—that is, engagement with the relational field without automatically pre-chunking it according to learned schemata—seems to be the common underlying factor in all of the many and varied “gifts” possessed to varying degrees by many autistics (Bogdashina, 2010, 2013, 2016; Manning, 2013; D. Williams, 1998). In addition to so-called savant abilities and the capacity for exceptional perception of detail discussed above, some of the more common examples of such gifts include superior sensory sensitivity, acuity, and discrimination in the visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, kinesthetic, or tactile realms (Bogdashina, 2010, 2013; Kupferstein & Walsh, 2016; Lawson, 2000; Manning & Massumi, 2014; Mottron et al., 2006; O’Riordan & Passetti, 2006; Prahlad, 2017; D. Williams, 1998); capacities for perceiving phenomena outside

the ordinary range of neurotypical human awareness (Bogdashina, 2010, 2013; Lawson, 2000; Manning & Massumi, 2014; Prahlad, 2017; Stillman, 2006; D. Williams, 1998); exceptional memory, including reduced susceptibility to forming false memories (Cowen, 2009; Mottron, 2011); exceptional capacities for deep and sustained focus on specific topics and phenomena of personal interest (Silberman, 2015); capacities for profound empathic connections with nonhuman animals (Grandin, 2006, 2008; Prince-Hughes, 2004, 2013); distinctive and profoundly rich aesthetic and poetic sensibilities (Bogdashina, 2010, 2013; Cowen, 2009; Manning & Massumi, 2014; Mukhopadhyay, 2003, 2008; Prahlad, 2017; Savarese, 2010, 2014, 2018); exceptional talents for various sorts of pattern recognition, discernment, and systematizing (Armstrong, 2010, 2012; Bogdashina, 2013; Cowen, 2009; Mottron, 2011; Selfe, 1977, 1983); and modes of nonlinear spatial thinking which facilitate novel syntheses of ideas and “intuitive grasp of complex systems” (Bogdashina, 2013, p. 63).

Even absent specific gifts such as these, autistics are natural outside-the-box thinkers, for the simple reason that their inability to develop fully automatic and effectively instantaneous chunking of their experience means, in essence, that they do not fully internalize all the perceptual and cognitive “boxes” of the prevailing cultural surround (Best, Arora, Porter, & Doherty, 2015; Cowen, 2009; Bogdashina, 2010, 2013; Manning, 2013, 2016; Manning & Massumi, 2014; Savarese, 2018; Silberman, 2015). The liminal zone of morphability, the zone of “dwell[ing] in the shaping” (Manning, 2013, p. 177) where the experience of the relational field is not fully chunked, is a zone alive with creative possibility, a

zone in which there is always the potential for novel insights, perspectives, ideas, and connections to emerge (Manning, 2013, 2016; Savarese, 2018).

One consequence of [cortical] overconnectivity and a greater reliance on posterior sensory regions of the brain to think is a preference for details over categories and the concrete over the abstract.... “Delayed decoding,” to borrow another scholar’s memorable phrase, facilitates extraordinary pattern detection in autism. In fact, the ability to think beneath the category is crucial for seeing how ostensibly discrete things might connect or how ostensibly linked things might connect differently. The researcher Tim Langdell found that autistics excel at “pure pattern” whereas neurotypicals excel at “social pattern”—“pure pattern” hides in plain sight, as in the test where the autistic boy called [a] decorative pillow a ravioli. It contradicts the socially assigned and accepted meanings of things, and in this way it can foster creativity. As Grandin writes, “the trick to coming up with novel uses for a brick is not to be attached to its identity as a brick.” (Savarese, 2018, p. 72)

Autistic Embodiment

As I note near the beginning of Chapter 1, the forms of transformative practice that feature in this inquiry are somatic in nature—that is, they aim to effect psychospiritual transformation through the intentional practice of certain ways of using the body. Somatic approaches to human transformation work on the principle that “the self or ‘I’ is an embodied self” (Kepner, 2001, pp. 9–10); most experienced practitioners of somatic work recognize a fundamental unity of mind and body. The brain, after all, is not separate from the body; the body is a unified system and the brain is a part of it, intricately interconnected with the rest of the system (Damasio, 2010). Human beings are not minds riding around in machines made of flesh and bone, we are bodies that think and feel and perceive—*psyche-somas* (Winnicott, 1958/1992), or *bodyminds* (Dychtwald, 1977/1986).

The self is an embodied self, and an underlying premise of transformative somatic practice is that one can therefore effect processes of change in the self

through effecting changes in embodiment (Grand, 1978, 1982, 1998, 2012, 2015a, 2015b; Heckler, 1984; Kepner, 2001). (Note that throughout this dissertation, when I speak of *embodiment* I use the term in the broadest sense, to refer to all aspects of how people use their bodies, consciously or otherwise—including movement, posture, body shape, tension and relaxation, sensing, feeling, breath, gaze, expression, vitality, and vocalization—and all the ways in which these various aspects of bodily usage combine to create the overall gestalt of how each person performs a unique human presence in the world.)

The self is an embodied self, and perception, cognition, and experience are embodied processes. Variations in style of neurocognitive functioning are thus inextricably entwined with variations in embodiment (Walker, 2018). Autism, like any other human mode of knowing and being, is an embodied way of knowing and being, a “fully embodied experiential” (Yergeau, 2018, p. 200). That is, autism involves not only distinctive modes of perception and cognition, but distinctive modes of embodiment that are entwined with and inseparable from autistic perceptual and cognitive styles and autistic experience (Leary & Donnellan, 2012; Torres & Whyatt, 2018; Walker, 2012a, 2018; Yergeau, 2013, 2018). “Autism is embodied; my embodiment is autism” (Yergeau, 2013, para. 18).

While I’ve never seen it summed up in quite this way by anyone else before, I would assert that one particularly clear and useful model for understanding autistic embodiment is to view it as being characterized by a combination of three distinctive qualities: first, dyspraxia; second, a strong

proclivity for stimming (defined below); and third, a tendency to orient the usage of the body toward the goal of sensory and cognitive regulation at the expense of orienting toward social performance (Walker, 2018). Each of these three qualities is examined in turn in the three sections that follow.

Dyspraxia and Autistic Embodiment

The term *dyspraxia* refers to a pervasive developmental impairment of physical motor control and coordination—“a difficulty, on the one hand, suppressing non-volitional movements, and, on the other, instigating and sustaining purposeful ones” (Savarese, 2013b, p. 1). High levels of apparently random “involuntary micromotions” (Torres & Whyatt, 2018, p. 369) or “motor noise” (Torres & Denisova, 2016, para. 49), “disturbance to movement during prospective, goal-directed motor control” (Anzulewicz, Sobota, & Delafield-Butt, 2016, para. 6), and other dyspraxia-associated variances in patterns of physical movement contribute to a distinctive style of autistic “motor signature” (para. 8). Manifestations of dyspraxia can include “clumsy gait, poor muscle tone, imbalance, as well as poor manual dexterity” (Dowell, Mahone, & Mostofsky, 2009, p. 2), and difficulty in the acquisition of new motor skills (Anzulewicz et al., 2016; Dowell et al., 2009; Dziuk et al., 2007; Leary & Donnellan, 2012; Miyahara, 2013; Torres & Whyatt, 2018).

Like sensory sensitivity, synesthesia, and other common autistic traits, dyspraxia manifests differently and to differing (and often wildly fluctuating) degrees in each autistic person. In some, it’s noticeable only as an awkward gait or posture, a clumsiness or a tendency toward odd physical tics. In others, there’s

significant impairment of motor skills, sometimes including speech (Leary & Donnellan, 2012; Torres & Whyatt, 2018; Walker, 2018). One of the more damaging neurotypical social prejudices impacting the autistic community is the unfortunately commonplace tendency to assess intelligence and mental aptitude based on performance of normative physicality and coordination, and “to interpret atypical comportment as the outward sign of inward dysfunction” (Savarese, 2013b, p. 1). In particular, autistics who are unable to speak due to dyspraxia are frequently dismissed as lacking in basic intelligence and self-awareness, and denied respect and self-determination, despite the fact that a growing number of nonspeaking autistics who spent their early lives being similarly dismissed have proven to be eloquent and insightful when given the opportunity to learn to communicate through typing or other assistive technologies (Biklen, 2005; Mukhopadhyay, 2008; Savarese, 2010, 2013a, 2013b, 2018; Sequenzia & Grace, 2015; Walker, 2018).

Although it has historically not been a central point of focus in the literature on autism, in recent years a substantial and ever-growing body of research and evidence has emerged—including both a great deal of first-hand testimony from autistics and a number of scientific studies—pointing to dyspraxia as one of autism’s core defining features (e.g., Anzulewicz et al., 2016; Dowell et al., 2009; Dziuk et al., 2007; Fournier, Hass, Naik, Lodha, & Caurauch, 2010; Jeste, 2011; Leary & Donnellan, 2012; Miyahara, 2013; Mukhopadhyay, 2008; Savarese, 2013b; Sequenzia, 2013; Torres & Denisova, 2016; Torres & Whyatt, 2018; Walker, 2018; Yergeau, 2018). Indeed, given the great disparity and

inconsistency that tends to pervade autism research and literature, the consistency of the evidence for dyspraxia being a core feature of autism is striking.

Keeping in mind that the neurobiological dynamics underlying any aspect of autistic experience have yet to be definitively demonstrated or even-close-to-agreed-upon by researchers (Jumah et al., 2016), and also that I am intentionally eschewing a focus on neurobiology in this present inquiry in favor of centering lived autistic experience, it's worth noting that the pinball theory of hyperconnectivity among cortical neurons discussed earlier in this chapter would account just as well for autistic dyspraxia as it accounts for the blooming, buzzing chaotic intensity of autistic sensory experience: if the neurobiological explanation for this chaotic intensity of sensory experience is in fact a cortical hyperconnectivity that causes incoming sensory signals to jump and “overflow” (Bogdashina, 2016, p. 29) to adjacent neural pathways, that same hyperconnectivity and neural overflow would surely also affect the outgoing signals that have to move through the cortex in order for any intentional action to be performed (Walker, 2018).

Whatever neurobiological mechanisms lie at the root of autistic dyspraxia, it also seems fairly obvious that the chaotic nature of autistic sensory experience must also serve to substantially exacerbate autistic motor impairments, insofar as sensory chaos makes it exceptionally challenging for an autistic person to tune into and process the flow of kinesthetic and proprioceptive sensory information that provides much of the basis for bodily awareness and for the moment-to-moment monitoring and adjustment of one's own physical movements

(Bogdashina, 2016; Leary & Donnellan, 2012; Roley, Blanche, & Schaaf, 2001; Walker, 2018).

For purposes of this present inquiry into autistic participation in transformative somatic practices, however, the effects of dyspraxia are far more relevant than the causes. Any autistic person attempting to engage in a physical practice such as aikido, which poses constant challenges to the coordination of any practitioner, must inevitably contend with the added challenge of autistic dyspraxia (Walker, 2018). The role dyspraxia has played in my own experience as a student, practitioner, and teacher of aikido is discussed in Chapter 4.

Stimming and Autistic Embodiment

A second defining feature of autistic embodiment is the tendency to engage in repetitive physical movements or other actions that provide specific forms of sensory stimulation. In conventional disciplinary discourses on autism based in the pathology paradigm, such actions are often referred to as *stereotypy* or *self-stimulatory behavior*, and are regarded as pathological symptoms that are best eliminated (Leary & Donnellan, 2012; Nijhof, Joha, & Pekelharing, 1998; Silberman, 2015; Yergeau, 2018). As a way of taking back ownership of narratives about autistic embodiment, autistics transformed the pathologizing and rather ungainly term self-stimulatory behavior into the more graceful and less medical-sounding term *stimming* (Nolan & McBride, 2015; Silberman, 2015; Walker, 2018; Yergeau, 2018). The root word *stim* functions as both a verb and a noun: “I stim by rocking back and forth; rocking back and forth is my favorite stim.”

“The potential embodied expressions of stimming are endless” (Yergeau, 2018, p. 201). Varieties of stimming include, but are certainly not limited to the following:

- *proprioceptive or kinesthetic* (e.g., rocking, pacing, waving or flapping one’s hands, seeking physical pressure or impact),
- *tactile* (e.g., touching objects and surfaces with appealing textures, stroking one’s own skin),
- *vestibular* (e.g., spinning or swinging),
- *visual* (e.g., gazing at running water or rising smoke),
- *auditory* (e.g., listening to running water or loud music),
- *olfactory or gustatory* (e.g., sniffing or tasting things),
- *verbal* (e.g., repetition of particular words or phrases), or
- any combination of the above (e.g., drumming, which combines the kinesthetic, the tactile, and the auditory).

Pathology-oriented neurotypical discourses and praxis around autism have tended to frame stimming as dysfunctional compulsive or automatic behavior that serves no purpose other than to detract from an autistic person’s performance of normativity—the performance of normativity being, from the perspective of those operating within the pathology paradigm, the goal toward which all autistics should be relentlessly pushed regardless of their own needs or wishes (Dawson, 2004; Silberman, 2015; Walker, 2018; A. Williams, 2018; Yergeau, 2018). The majority of autistics, on the other hand, along with a growing number of non-autistic thinkers who’ve come to view autism and autistics from perspectives less

bound by the assumptions of the pathology paradigm, recognize stimming as serving vital functions in autistic consciousness (e.g., Leary & Donnellan, 2012; Nolan & McBride, 2015; Walker, 2012a, 2018; Yergeau, 2018).

Among those non-autistic researchers and professionals who recognize that it has value and purpose, stimming is most commonly understood as serving essential functions of self-regulation and integration—that is, as being a means by which autistics are able to regulate their chaotic experience to avoid being overwhelmed by it, and by which they are able to better integrate that experience in order to bring increased coherence and navigability to their perceptual worlds (e.g., Leary & Donnellan, 2012; Torres & Whyatt, 2018). Non-autistic infants in what Piaget (1953) called the *sensorimotor stage* of development, immersed in the developmental task of parsing the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the sensory field into coherence, are constantly engaged in stimming, even if it's not commonly referred to as stimming when non-autistic infants do it (Nijhof et al., 1998; Piaget, 1953). Given the central role of stimming in the developmental task of parsing and integrating the sensory field, and given that parsing and integrating the sensory field is an ongoing lifelong activity for autistics rather than just an early developmental stage (Manning, 2013; Walker, 2018), it makes sense that stimming would also be a lifelong activity for autistics.

While stimming does indeed serve these vital regulatory and integrative functions for autistics, an understanding of stimming that stops at there is incomplete. Such an understanding is of course a vast improvement over the conventional view of stimming as a purposeless and pathological symptom to be

eradicated—but it is nonetheless a limited understanding, and I suspect the limitations derive from the same paternalistic attitudes and implicit assumptions of neurotypical superiority that lie at the root of the pathology paradigm (Walker, 2012b, 2016; Yergeau, 2018). When well-intentioned neurotypical autism researchers write, for instance, that stims “might be understood as coping mechanisms supporting stability and control of perception” (Torres & Whyatt, 2018, p. 18), or “may serve a purpose for a person in accommodating or adjusting his movements to meet the physical, perceptual or emotional demands of the situation” (Leary & Donnellan, 2012, p. 51), they certainly aren’t wrong. But when stimming is understood as only a coping strategy or accommodation that enables autistics to compensate for their neurobiological or sensorimotor “defects,” the underlying narrative is still a narrative in which autistics are defective—a narrative that implicitly assumes that the only worthwhile potential of autistics is their potential to compensate for their defects enough to fit into neurotypical society and be almost-normal, and a narrative that thus implicitly dismisses the possibility that there are autistic capacities and potentials worth exploring that have nothing to do with aspiring to normativity or with mere compensation.

Discussions of stimming in the first-hand accounts of autistics offer a striking contrast to this reductionist narrative. In autistic accounts, stimming is revealed to be a highly complex and sophisticated body of instinctual “sensory praxis” (Nolan & McBride, 2015, p. 1069), which in addition to serving to regulate and integrate sensory, perceptual, cognitive, and emotional experience,

functions as a way of exploring and relating to the sensory world, and as a means of accessing not only a wide range of cognitive and emotional capacities but also psychospiritual states and capacities that would seem to fall under the category of the transpersonal, such as flow states (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990/2008, 1993; McDonnell & Milton, 2014) or experiences of profound communion with elements of the physical and sensory environment (Baggs, 2007; Mukhopadhyay, 2008; Nolan & McBride, 2015). Autistic capacities for transpersonal experience are discussed in the final section of this chapter, “Autistic Psychospiritual Potentials,” while my own experiences of the connection between such capacities and stimming are discussed in Chapter 5.

It’s worth noting here that the act of stimulating one’s own senses in specific ways in order to access certain states, feelings, or capacities is hardly unique to autistics. Everyone does this to some degree, in some way or other; every day, millions of neurotypical individuals engage in such behaviors as pacing back and forth because it helps them think, drumming their fingers on a desk or table, pausing to deeply inhale a pleasing scent, letting themselves be soothed and entranced by the sound of rain on the roof or the sight of flickering flames in a fireplace, stroking a pet or the hair or skin of a lover because it feels good, or spontaneously moving their bodies as they get into the groove of a piece of music. One could therefore argue that everybody stims, and that autistics, because stimming is such an essential practice for the regulation and navigation of autistic sensory and cognitive experience, simply tend to stim more than non-autistics (Walker, 2018).

Based on the origins and common usage of the term stim, however, one could also argue that the sort of activities described in the previous paragraph, as ordinarily performed by neurotypical individuals, are properly excluded from the category of stimming by virtue of the very fact that they fall within the commonly accepted neurotypical norms of behavior and embodiment. Such activities, when engaged in by neurotypical individuals, are not commonly regarded as symptoms of any dire pathology by professionals in the fields of psychology and medicine, nor assigned such labels such as “self-stimulatory behavior.” One could argue that an action must necessarily fall outside of the bounds of neuronormativity in some way in order to qualify as stimming; that part of what defines any given activity as stimming is that it is in some manner and to some degree “pathologized within neurotypical semiotic domains” (Nolan & McBride, 2015, p. 1070) or that it in some way constitutes, however unintentionally or involuntarily, a “bodily disobedience” (Yergeau, 2018, p. 200) of the written or unwritten rules governing the performance of normative embodiment in the dominant neurotypical culture.

For purposes of this present inquiry, then, I offer the following definition of stimming: To stim is to engage in any action that falls outside the boundaries of the social performance of normativity, and that provides some form of sensory stimulation in order to facilitate, intentionally or otherwise, some particular cognitive or sensorimotor process, or access to some particular state or capacity of consciousness or sensorimotor experience.

Asociality and Autistic Embodiment

Stimming is hardly the only way in which human beings use their bodies to facilitate the regulation and integration of their consciousness and sensorimotor experience. Human beings, autistic or otherwise, constantly make adjustments in their embodiment for the purpose of regulating experience: taking a deep breath to release tension, shifting the posture for comfort, averting the gaze from a glaring light, curling up the body for warmth or comfort, or the various forms of movement people engage in when thinking deeply or processing intense emotion or getting into a piece of music, to give just a few examples. Human beings also use their bodies as instruments of social performance, to communicate social meaning and embody social roles in accordance with learned cultural norms of embodiment (Butler, 1990; Grand, 2006, 2012; Rogoff, 2003).

There is, of course, only so much that one can be doing with one's body at any given point in time. Thus, a sort of zero-sum economics of embodiment might be said to exist, in which the more a person's embodiment in a given moment is devoted to the regulation and integration of cognitive and sensorimotor experience, the less it's available to be devoted to normative social engagement and performance. Because autistic cognitive and sensorimotor experience is more intense, complex, and chaotic than neurotypical cognitive and sensorimotor experience, the regulation and integration of experience requires not only more attentional "bandwidth" for autistics than for neurotypical individuals, but also more of the available bandwidth of bodily activity. In other words, while everyone uses their embodiment to regulate their sensory and cognitive

experience, and everyone uses their embodiment for the performance of sociality, autistic embodiment—relative to neurotypical embodiment—tends to involve a great deal more of the former at the expense of the latter. Autistic embodiment tends to be more shaped by the need to interact in specific ways with the overall sensory field, and consequently less shaped by cultural norms or social agendas (Walker, 2018).

Autistic embodiment, including stimming, thus tends toward the asocial, relative to neurotypical norms—and thus tends also to “[defy] neurotypical logic and comprehension” (Nolan & McBride, 2015, p. 1071) because the sociality of neurotypical embodiment habituates neurotypicals to the act of looking for social meaning in body language. Autistic embodiment is pathologized and stigmatized within neurotypical society largely because, in its asociality, it tends to “not only defy social order, but fail to acknowledge social order’s very existence” (Yergeau, 2018, p. 27).

Venturing into the autoethnographic for a moment, I believe the following example from my own childhood serves well as an example of an encounter between autistic asocial embodiment and the neurotypical tendency to seek or project social meaning. Like the majority of autistic children, I avoided eye contact whenever possible. To my relatively unfiltered autistic perceptions, eye contact was so loaded with information that it made it impossible for me to deal with any other aspect of an interaction, like remembering how to use or comprehend words. And, like the majority of autistic children, I’d avoided eye

contact so much since infancy that I'd never internalized any of the non-autistic cultural norms around how to use it.

Now, I was a White kid growing up in a mostly Black neighborhood, and going to a school with mostly White teachers. According to the cultural norms of the Black adults in my neighborhood, it was a sign of disrespect, an aggressive challenge to authority, if children looked their elders straight in the eye. But according to the cultural norms of my White teachers and most of the other white adults I encountered, lack of eye contact was a sign of inattention and dishonesty. The result was that I was constantly targeted and subjected to abuse by White adults for being disrespectful, inattentive, and “obviously hiding something”—while Black adults tended to be much nicer to me than White adults, and to remark on how well-mannered I was for a White kid.

Since I rarely said anything at all, the judgments these various adults made about my character were formed, to a large degree, on the basis of how they interpreted my lack of eye contact—on numerous occasions, the White adults even said as much. And their interpretations were based on what their cultural norms said about the meaning of eye contact or lack thereof. What none of them ever understood was that my avoidance of eye contact, like my stimming and most other aspects of my embodiment, had no social meaning behind it at all; it was simply about regulating my own sensory and cognitive experience. It wasn't in any way about them, or about my attitude toward my interactions with them (Walker, 2018).

The chaotic motor effects of dyspraxia, the prevalence of various forms of stimming, and the tendency to orient the use of the body toward the goal of sensory and cognitive regulation at the expense of orienting toward the embodied performance of normative sociality—these three factors interact and combine to inform autistic styles of embodiment. Individual embodiment is shaped by many factors, of course—including genetics, culture, and personal experiences—and individual embodiment varies as much among autistics as among non-autistics. And yet, in each and every one of the many autistic people over the years, hailing from many different backgrounds and cultures and possessing widely disparate personalities, I’ve observed certain distinctive commonalities of embodiment—certain shared movement signatures, subtle and nigh-impossible to describe yet readily recognizable to the attuned and experienced eye—that transcend cultural differences and mark them unmistakably as members of my scattered tribe (Walker, 2018).

Autistic Psychospiritual Potentials

The growing body of first-hand accounts of the lived experience of autistic people contains numerous descriptions of the sort of exceptional human experiences (G. Palmer & Hastings, 2013) that might best be characterized as transpersonal experience (Daniels, 2013; Grof, 2000; Walsh & Vaughan, 1993) or peak experience (Maslow, 1968, 1971; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990/2008). The varieties of transpersonal or peak experience reported by autistics include the following:

- *flow states* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990/2008, 1993), involving total immersion in an autotelic activity (Manning & Massumi, 2014; McDonnell & Milton, 2014; Mukhopadhyay, 2008; Prince-Hughes, 2004; Tammet, 2007);
- states of transcendent bliss brought on by attending to some manifestation of aesthetic beauty (Bogdashina, 2010, 2013; Manning & Massumi, 2014; Mukhopadhyay, 2008; Prahlad, 2017; Prince-Hughes, 2013; Sequenzia, 2015a, 2015b; Walker, 2012a; D. Williams, 1998, 1999);
- experiences of profound attunement or spontaneous intuitive insight (Bogdashina, 2010, 2013; Manning & Massumi, 2014; Mukhopadhyay, 2008; Prahlad, 2017; Prince-Hughes, 2004; Stillman, 2006; Tammet, 2007; D. Williams, 1998, 1999);
- a vividly experienced, perhaps shamanistic, sense of *animism* or *panpsychism*—of everything being alive, of being able to sense and relate to a life force, spiritual essence, or *élan vital* that suffuses or is inherent in all things (Bogdashina, 2013; Manning, 2013; Manning & Massumi, 2014; Mukhopadhyay, 2008; Prahlad, 2017; Prince-Hughes, 2013; Savarese, 2010, 2014, 2018);
- experiences of the state sometimes referred to in Zen Buddhism as *wu-hsin*, *mushin*, or *no-mind* (Suzuki, 1972), in which the mind is empty of thought and a person experiences “pure consciousness” (Bogdashina, 2013, p. 144) or “just being” (p. 145); and

- experiences of *ego-transcendence* or “being the divine Not-self” (Huxley, 1954/2009, p. 35), in which a sense of psychic merging—perhaps with the overall physical/sensory environment, a specific object or feature of the environment, a nonhuman animal, or a specific sensory stimulus or combination of stimuli—temporarily overrides and dissolves the sense of being a separate self (Bogdashina, 2010, 2013; Manning & Massumi, 2014; Mukhopadhyay, 2008; Prince-Hughes, 2004; D. Williams, 1998, 1999).

The phenomenon of transpersonal experiences and peak experiences in the autistic population has yet to be explored in any formal research studies. Some anecdotal evidence and autoethnographic accounts, however, seem to point toward a strong possibility that relative to the bulk of the human population, autistic people may tend to be exceptionally prone to such experiences. If this is indeed the case, it seems probable that this high level of susceptibility to such experiences has its origins in precisely the same neurocognitive and perceptual dynamics, already discussed above, that underlie the other distinctive qualities, challenges, and gifts of autistic consciousness (Bogdashina, 2010, 2013).

Contrary to the traditional view that autistic people experience difficulty or inability in understanding spiritual and religious notions, due to their differences in sensory perceptual, cognitive and linguistic development, religious and spiritual experiences seem to come more easily to [autistic people]. (Bogdashina, 2013, p. 77)

In the existing literature on autistic experience, a consistent feature of accounts of the transpersonal experiences and peak experiences of autistics is that such experiences are portrayed as arising spontaneously—and seemingly more or

less at random—from the vagaries of autistic neurology as it reacts to encounters with various aspects of the world (e.g., Bogdashina, 2010, 2013; Manning & Massumi, 2014; Mukhopadhyay, 2003, 2008; D. Williams, 1998, 1999). This tendency—consistent with the way the discourse of the pathology paradigm tends to frame autistics as lacking agency and “passively subject to the motions of brains and dermis gone awry” (Yergeau, 2018, p. 8) stands in marked contrast to the far more extensive discussion of the transpersonal experiences and peak experiences of more-or-less neurotypical individuals, which can be found in the literature of such fields as positive psychology and transpersonal psychology. While this latter body of literature does include ample focus on the spontaneous occurrence of transpersonal experiences and peak experiences, it tends to place greater emphasis on the attainment and integration of such experiences through intentional engagement in transformative practices as part of a path of self-actualization and realization of higher human psychospiritual potentials (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi, 1990/2008, 1993; Daniels, 2013; Garcia-Romeu & Tart, 2013; Grof, 2000; Maslow, 1968, 1971; Metzner, 1998; Murphy, 1992; Tart, 1990).

The rather small body of existing literature that does discuss the participation of autistics in transformative practices such as meditation, yoga, or martial arts is rooted firmly in the pathology paradigm; this literature focuses exclusively on the potential of transformative practices to serve as “therapies” that train autistics to self-regulate, with the specific aim of helping them to do better at conforming to the dominant neurotypical culture’s behavioral norms (e.g., Bahrami, Movahedi, Marandi, & Abedi, 2012; Bolls, 2013; Chan, Sze, Siu, Lau,

& Cheung, 2002; Goldberg, 2013; Mitchell, 2009; Sequeira & Ahmed, 2012; Singh, et al., 2011). The literature with this focus invariably fails to make any mention whatsoever of the autistic capacity for the sort of transpersonal experiences and peak experiences discussed above, or of the possibility of autistic people engaging in transformative practices as a path toward self-actualization, realization of higher human psychospiritual potentials, or intentional access to transpersonal experiences and peak experiences. As noted earlier in this chapter, these significant omissions reflect a cultural double standard whereby pursuit of the realization of exceptional human psychospiritual potentials is assumed to be the province of persons who are more or less neurotypical, while it is assumed that the only “higher potential” to which an autistic person can or should aspire is the potential to become so compliant with the dominant culture’s standards of “normal” as to be indistinguishable from a particularly docile and nonextraordinary neurotypical.

In summary, then, there exists one body of literature that addresses the potential of (presumed-more-or-less neurotypical) humans to attain certain psychospiritual states and experiences through the intentional use of transformative practices. There exists a second, separate body of literature that includes some noteworthy anecdotal evidence indicating that certain modes of consciousness characteristic of autistics may lend themselves particularly well to some of these same states and experiences. Yet there currently exists no significant published work that bridges or synthesizes these two bodies of literature by exploring the interaction of transformative practices with autistic

ways of knowing and being, the use of transformative practices toward the realization of the higher psychospiritual potentials of autistic people, or the benefits that autistic ways of knowing might hold for non-autistic participants in transformative practices. The present inquiry, exploring my own experiences as an autistic participant in transformative practices, is intended as a step toward filling this gap.

CHAPTER 3: METHOD

Autoethnographic texts consist primarily of autobiographical narratives—“aesthetic and evocative thick descriptions of personal and interpersonal experience” (Ellis et al., 2011, para. 14)—intertwined with reflections upon and interpretations of those narratives, written in the researcher’s own natural voice and idioms (Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2004, 2009; M. Gergen & Gergen, 2002; P. Smith, 2013), “complete with colloquialisms, reverberations from multiple relationships, and emotional expressiveness” (M. Gergen & Gergen, 2002, p. 14). In an autoethnographic inquiry, “the data collection field ... is the researcher’s own life” (Chang, 2008, p. 89), and “the researcher and the subject of regard are the same” (P. Smith, 2013, pp. 18–19). Lived personal experience “recalled from the past forms the basis of autoethnographic data” (Chang, 2008, p. 71) and “personal memory [is] a primary source of information” (p. 71). Autoethnographic research “challenges what counts as knowledge, making the case for first person knowledge and life experience as data” (Morimoto, 2008, p. 31).

Emphasis on the reflective and interpretive aspects of the writing process—the mindful engagement in the process of creative interpretation by which new insight and knowledge are produced—is a key element of autoethnographic research (Chang, 2008; Denzin, 2014; Ellis, 1999, 2004, 2009; P. Smith, 2013); autoethnographic writing explicitly incorporates “the author’s subjective understandings” (P. Smith, 2013, p. 19). The creation of a written narrative centered around my personal experiences of engagement in

transformative practices, and the processes of in-depth recall, reflection, and interpretation involved in the creation of such narratives, thus constitute the primary procedures for this present inquiry.

Central to autoethnography is “its intent of gaining a cultural understanding” (Chang, 2008, p. 125). Autoethnographic inquiries “use personal experience to illustrate facets of cultural experience” (Ellis et al., 2011, para. 9); “the goal is to use [one’s] life experience to generalize to a larger group or culture” (Ellis, 1999, p. 671). It is this emphasis on cultural understanding and cultural contextualization of the autoethnographer’s experience that makes autoethnography a form of ethnographic research (Chang, 2008; Denzin, 2014; Ellis, 2004, 2009; Ellis et al., 2011; P. Smith, 2013).

My approach to this autoethnographic inquiry is heavily informed by Carolyn Ellis’ (1999) conceptualization of “heartful autoethnography,” which she describes as

an ethnography that includes researchers’ vulnerable selves, emotions, bodies, and spirits; produces evocative stories that create the effect of reality; celebrates concrete experience and intimate detail; examines how human experience is endowed with meaning; ... encourages compassion and empathy; helps us know how to live and cope; ... seeks a fusion between social science and literature in which, as Gregory Bateson says, “you are partly blown by the winds of reality and partly an artist creating a composite out of the inner and outer events”; and ... [extends] ethnography to include the heart, the autobiographical, and the artistic text. (p. 669)

The Importance of Autoethnography in Autism Research

From the time the phenomenon of autism was first recognized and named in the 1940s (Silberman, 2015) up through the present day, disciplinary discourses on autism have been dominated by an epistemological approach that ignores the

subjectivity and actual lived experience of autistic people (Biklen, 2005; Leary & Donnellan, 2012; Manning, 2013; Yergeau, 2013, 2015, 2018; Yergeau & Huebner, 2017). Disciplinary knowledge production regarding the minds, bodies, and lives of autistic people has consisted almost exclusively of non-autistic researchers conducting and interpreting research in ways that are heavily biased toward validating their existing assumptions, cultural prejudices, practices, and pet theories. Autistics have been invited to participate in the production of disciplinary knowledge and discourse about themselves only as objects of study, without input into either the construction of research or the interpretation and framing of results (Baggs, 2016; Biklen, 2005; Gernsbacher, 2017; Leary & Donnellan, 2012; Manning, 2013; Milton, 2012; Smukler, 2005; Yergeau, 2013, 2018; Yergeau & Huebner, 2017).

The pervasiveness of these conditions in the realm of autism-related disciplinary knowledge production has led to a state of affairs in which the prevailing body of theory on autism is built upon a collection of gross misconceptions and false and dehumanizing stereotypes (Biklen, 2005; McGuire, 2016; Savarese, 2014, 2018; Silberman, 2015; Smukler, 2005; Yergeau, 2013, 2015, 2018; Yergeau & Huebner, 2017). Respected academics with highly successful careers—including those who are widely regarded as leading authorities on autism—regularly assert, for example, that autistic people are incapable of empathy or basic human connection, or even of understanding that other people have minds at all (e.g., Baron-Cohen, 1987, 1989, 1997; Baron-Cohen et al., 1985; Frith, 2003; Frith & Happé, 1999); that autistic people lack the

capacities for imagination and symbolic thought (e.g., Baron-Cohen, 1987); that autistic people “lack introspective abilities” (Yergeau & Huebner, 2017, p. 278) or basic capacities for self-awareness or self-reflection (e.g., Frith, 2003; Frith & Happé, 1999); and that due to alleged deficiencies such as these, autistic people are not fully human or not human at all (Yergeau, 2013, 2018; Yergeau & Huebner, 2017). For instance, influential autism researchers Uta Frith and Francesca Happé (1999), two of the primary architects of the “autism as lack of empathy or theory of mind” canard popularized by Frith’s protégé Simon Baron-Cohen (1997), have asserted that “Autism is a devastating disorder because it disrupts not only understanding of others and their social relationships, but also understanding of self” (Frith & Happé, 1999, p. 19) and that first-person accounts by autistics of their own lived experiences should therefore not be considered valid. The founder of the popular compliance-oriented behaviorist “therapy” ABA once infamously said of autistic children: “You have a person in the physical sense ... but they are not people in the psychological sense” (Lovaas, as quoted in Yergeau, 2018, p. 116). Further examples of the dehumanization of autistics and dismissal of autistic perspectives and self-knowledge within mainstream disciplinary discourses can be found extensively catalogued and analyzed in Melanie Yergeau’s (2018) *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness* and Anne McGuire’s (2016) *War on Autism: On the Cultural Logic of Normative Violence*.

Savarese (2010) compares this scientific othering of autistic people, this marginalizing of lived autistic experience in favor of arrogant presumptions by

non-autistic “experts” about autistic experience and autistic lives, to the racist othering and pervasive “center/margin binary” (p. 274) that has characterized colonialist research on colonized peoples. He calls for a centering of first-person autoethnographic narratives of autistic experience and autistic knowledge, written in the natural voices and styles of autistics, as a crucial step toward creating a “postcolonial” understanding of autism.

While comparing the prevailing paradigm of autism research to colonialism is an imperfect analogy that runs the risk of trivializing the magnitude of colonialism’s horrors, one thing the we in the autistic community certainly do have in common with colonized indigenous communities and others pushing back against cultural hegemony is that our stories of our own lived experiences, in our own voices, have the potential to constitute “powerful forms of resistance” (L. T. Smith, 2012, p. 2) to the dehumanizing lens of scientific research paradigms. Like numerous other marginalized communities, we have found that autoethnography, in which we not only tell our stories but contextualize them (Chang, 2008; Denzin, 2014, 2009; Ellis, 1999, 2004, 2009; Ellis et al., 2011; P. Smith, 2013), constitutes a powerful form of “‘researching back,’ in the same tradition of ‘writing back’ or ‘talking back’ that characterizes much of the post-colonial or anti-colonial literature” (L. T. Smith, 2012, p. 8). Autoethnography is traditionally a liberatory research method, “a way to talk back to dominating stories about the world and people ... a way of speaking outside and against the dominant, hegemonic culture” (P. Smith, 2013, p. 26).

Thus, my choice of autoethnography as my research method has its basis not only in the fact that it happens to be a method particularly well-suited to the specific inquiry at hand, but also in the intrinsic value of autistic autoethnography as a form of resistance to a dominant paradigm that often portrays autistics like myself as lacking the very sort of reflective capacity and insight into human affairs that autoethnographic work requires (Yergeau, 2013, 2015, 2018). “Autistic narrative persists. It persists in the face of discourses that would render us arhetorical and tragically inhuman” (Yergeau, 2018, p. 23). In addition to the other intended outcomes of the inquiry (discussed in Chapter 1), it is my hope and intent to inspire others to make further contributions to the growing genre of autistic autoethnography, because I regard such work as a vital tool of liberation and an essential means of countering a dominant discourse that insists on treating autistic people exclusively as objects rather than subjects (Yergeau, 2013, 2015, 2018). In Melanie Yergeau’s (2018) words,

What’s at risk here is who tells my story, and, more broadly, who tells the story of my people. What’s of concern is who gets to author our individual and collective identities, who gets to determine whether we are, in fact, narrative creatures, whether we are living beings in rhetorical bodies, whether we are even allowed to call ourselves human. (p. 21)

Structure and Approach

In Chapters 1 and 2, I summarize the topic of my inquiry and review relevant background knowledge found in the existing literature. Following this present chapter’s discussion of my research methodology, the real substance of the inquiry unfolds in two chapters of autoethnographic narrative exploration: Chapter 4 focuses on my experiences as a practitioner and teacher of aikido, and

Chapter 5 focuses primarily on my experiences working with the experimental physical theatre group ParaTheatrical ReSearch. Reflections on the broader implications of my experiences are woven into both of those chapters. In Chapter 6, I revisit some of the key themes and points of the dissertation that merit further discussion, and consider my narrative's potential implications for praxis and further research.

Some autoethnographic works eschew such conventional structural elements as distinct literature review chapters or methodology chapters, the authors opting instead to weave all such elements into their autoethnographic narratives (e.g., Ellis, 2004, 2009). However, with the exception of the brief childhood anecdote about eye contact that appears in the section of Chapter 2 entitled "Asociality and Autistic Embodiment," I've opted to go with a more conventional academic structure in these first three chapters, and then take a more free-flowing narrative approach to autoethnographic inquiry in the subsequent chapters. I've made this structural choice partly in the interest of utility and readability: it seems to me that it would be unwieldy to attempt to integrate all of the information in Chapter 2 into the flow of autoethnographic storytelling.

My structural choices are also motivated by my characteristically autistic proclivity for finding delight in the aesthetics of certain sorts of patterns. In building a foundation in the early chapters by adhering to a highly conventional structure, meticulously laying out background information with extensive citations, and in then using that foundation as a launching point for a far less conventional and more free-flowing narrative inquiry, my approach to this

dissertation quite intentionally mirrors the tendency of autistic children to meticulously sort out toys and line them up prior to integrating them into more fluid forms of play, and the way that aikido training begins with rigorous grounding in formal etiquette and precise technical choreography which then serves as a foundation for fluid spontaneity.

As previously noted, autoethnography is customarily written in the researcher's own natural voice and idioms (Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2004, 2009; M. Gergen & Gergen, 2002; P. Smith, 2013); for me, that means not only using language in the ways that flow naturally for me, but also structuring my approach in a way that holds intuitive resonance and aesthetic appeal for me in its repetition of the patterns of both autistic play and aikido training. Part of what I seek to communicate about autistic experience is thus expressed within the very structure of the dissertation.

Limits, Goals, and Validity of the Inquiry

As discussed in Chapter 1, this inquiry focuses on a selection of my own lived experiences that are directly relevant to the topic of the interaction of transformative practices with autistic ways of knowing and being, and the use of transformative practices toward the realization of positive autistic potentials. My accounts of these experiences are drawn largely from my own memory; I have not conducted interviews or otherwise gathered previously unpublished personal data from subjects other than myself.

Like most interpretive autoethnographic research, this inquiry does not seek to generate anything resembling definitive answers, or readily quantifiable

scientific data that can “be judged by traditional positivist criteria” (Denzin, 2014, p. 70). Instead, interpretive autoethnographic inquiries such as this one “focus on the construction of stories and their meanings rather than on the collection, organization, verification, and presentation of evidence” (Ellis, 2009, p. 14) and aim

to tell stories that show bodily, cognitive, emotional and spiritual experience. The goal is to practice an artful, poetic, and empathic social science in which readers can keep in their minds and feel in their bodies the complexities of concrete moments of lived experience. [Those doing such research] want readers to be able to put themselves in the place of others, within a culture of experience that enlarges their social awareness and empathy. Their goals include ... giving voice to stories and groups of people traditionally left out of social scientific inquiry ... [and] improving readers’, participants’, and authors’ lives. (Ellis, 2004, p. 30)

Interpretive autoethnographic works treat the acts of writing and reflection as legitimate practices of research and knowledge production in their own right (Denzin, 2014; Ellis, 1999, 2004, 2009; Goodall, 2001; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005); they merge the creative and analytical (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005; Sparkes, 2002) and “disrupt the binary of science and art” (Ellis et al., 2011, para. 39). These works start from the understanding that knowledge production and writing are

always partial, local, and situational and that [the subjectivity of the self is] always present. ... Working from that premise frees us to write material in a variety of ways—to tell and retell. There is no such thing as “getting it right,” only “getting it” differently contoured and nuanced. When using creative analytical practices, ethnographers learn about the topics and about themselves that which was unknowable and unimaginable using conventional analytical procedures, metaphors, and writing formats. (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, pp. 962–963)

Autoethnographic scholar Phil Smith (2013) notes that in light of these distinctive goals and qualities that characterize interpretive autoethnography as a

method of inquiry, “usual understandings of validity are not applicable to autoethnographic work” and therefore autoethnographers “must have other criteria for determining the value of their work” (p. 25).

How, then, does one assess the validity or quality of works such as this one, if not by the conventional criteria of positivist social science? Richardson & St. Pierre (2005) suggest four fundamental criteria for evaluation: whether the work makes a substantive contribution; the aesthetic merit of the work; the reflexivity demonstrated by the researcher; and whether the work holds the potential to make sufficient impact to inspire some form of positive action, transformation, or further inquiry (p. 964). These four criteria, each of which is discussed in further detail below, are readily applicable to this present dissertation, and I have adopted them as guiding standards for assessing the validity of my autoethnographic narrative.

Substantive Contribution

Does the work contribute to knowledge and understanding in a substantial way by providing perspectives, stories, and ideas that have been absent from the existing published literature (Ellis et al., 2011; Goodall, 2001; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, P. Smith, 2013)? A crucial function of autoethnography is to “illustrate new perspectives on personal experience ... by finding and filling a ‘gap’ in existing, related storylines” (Ellis et al., 2011, para. 10). For discussion of how this present inquiry makes such a contribution, see the section entitled “Significance of the Inquiry” in Chapter 1, the section entitled “Autistic

Psychospiritual Potentials” in Chapter 2, and the section on “The Importance of Autoethnography in Autism Research” that appears earlier in this present chapter.

Aesthetic Merit

By centering “aesthetic and evocative thick descriptions of personal and interpersonal experience” (Ellis et al., 2011, para. 14) and “the production of evocative stories” (Sparkes, 2002, p. 210), autoethnographic inquiry blends the analytical and the creative into a “social science art form” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 964). Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) argue that such work should therefore be evaluated based not only on contributions to knowledge and understanding, but on aesthetic criteria as well:

Rather than reducing standards, another standard is added. Does this piece succeed aesthetically? Does the use of creative analytical practices open up the text and invite interpretive responses? Is the text artistically shaped, satisfying, complex, and not boring? (p. 964)

Reflexivity

Since interpretive autoethnography uses the very act of reflective writing as the primary method of inquiry (Denzin, 2014; Ellis, 1999, 2004, 2009; Goodall, 2001; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005), another essential criterion for evaluating the merit or validity of an autoethnographic work is the depth and quality of the author’s reflexivity. It is by practicing honest self-reflexivity on the page, sufficient “self-awareness and self-exposure” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 964), and “the inclusion of the researcher’s vulnerable selves, emotions, body, and spirit” (Sparkes, 2002, p. 210) that the autoethnographer “can encourage acts of witnessing, empathy, and connection that extend beyond the

self or the author and thereby contribute to sociological understanding” (p. 222). This is a central goal of my approach in Chapters 4 and 5 of this dissertation.

Impact

Ultimately, the goal of interpretive autoethnographic works such as this present inquiry is not only to make a contribution to knowledge and understanding, but to do so in a way that moves others to further inquiry, constructive dialogue, heightened awareness, and transformative action (Denzin, 2014; Ellis, 1999, 2004, 2009; Ellis et al., 2011; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005; Sparkes, 2002). Ellis (1999) suggests that the validity of an autoethnographic narrative be judged “by whether it helps readers communicate with others different from themselves or offers a way to improve the lives of participants and readers or even your own” (p. 674).

The autoethnographer not only tries to make personal experience meaningful and cultural experience engaging, but also, by producing accessible texts, she or he may be able to reach wider and more diverse audiences that traditional research usually disregards, a move that can make personal and social change possible for more people. (Ellis et al., 2011, para. 14)

In the case of this particular inquiry, my aim is to inspire others, both autistic and non-autistic, to their own active explorations of positive autistic potentials, transformative practices, and the interaction of transformative practices with autistic ways of knowing and being. Autistic autoethnography is an emergent genre that is of vital importance to the evolution of the discourse on autism and to the self-understanding and long-term wellbeing of the autistic community. In writing the first substantial autoethnographic work on the use of transformative somatic practices toward the realization of autistic potentials for thriving and self-

actualization, my intention is not to produce conclusive answers and claims to certainty, but rather break new ground in a way that invites others to pursue their own work in this area and to engage with new possibilities.

CHAPTER 4: AIKIDO

I began practicing aikido when I was 12 years old. Almost four decades have gone by since my first aikido class, and in that time I've never stopped training for any significant length of time, even during periods of homelessness and other substantial hardship. I began taking on teaching responsibilities in my local aikido dojo when I was still in my teens, and since my early twenties I've taught multiple aikido classes nearly every week—at first in a variety of settings including college aikido clubs, public parks, and dance and yoga studios, and these days in my own dojo in Berkeley, California.

Before launching into an account of my own personal experiences of aikido training, it seems useful to provide an introductory explanation of the art of aikido: what it is, the actual physical practices that comprise the basics of training in an aikido dojo (training studio), and how aikido functions as a transformative practice.

A Budo of Harmony and Accord

The Japanese word *budo* is commonly translated as “martial art” or “martial arts”—a translation that unfortunately fails to do full justice to the concept. The Japanese logographic character *bu* means “war,” often with the implication of courage or of fighting to protect. The character *do*—identical to the Chinese character *tao*, the same character associated with the Chinese philosophical tradition of Taoism—means “way” or “path.” So a more accurate translation of *budo* might be “way of the warrior” or “warrior’s path” (Leonard, 1999; Murphy, 1992; Saotome, 1993; Ueshiba, 1991).

Aikido is a form of *budo* developed during the 20th century but deeply rooted in much older traditional *budo* practices. Aikido's founder, Morihei Ueshiba (1883–1969)—generally referred to by aikido practitioners as *O-Sensei*, meaning “Great Teacher”—trained intensively for many years in various forms and traditions of *budo*, and by the age of 40 had come to be widely regarded as the most advanced Japanese martial artist of his generation (Holiday, 2013; Leonard, 1999; Saotome, 1993). O-Sensei's reputation attracted many students; it also occasionally attracted competitive-minded martial arts practitioners who would come to his dojo and challenge him to combat. One of these challengers was a naval officer and advanced practitioner of traditional Japanese swordfighting, who showed up in the spring of 1925 and demanded that the 41-year-old O-Sensei face him in a duel with *bokken* (heavy wooden sticks carved to duplicate the shape of the *katana*, the classic samurai-style Japanese longsword). O-Sensei, who at this point in his life was becoming disillusioned with the prevailing culture of aggressive competition in *budo*, refused to pick up his own *bokken*, but the officer attacked him anyway. Refusing to strike back but also refusing to run away, O-Sensei found himself in a state of serene alertness in which he was able to remain within reach of the officer and yet avoid every blow of his weapon. The officer attacked with the *bokken* over and over, repeatedly failing to connect, until he became so exhausted that he gave up and left. Still in whatever state of heightened consciousness he'd spontaneously tapped into that had enabled him to perform this feat, O-Sensei wandered out into the dojo's garden and doused himself with cold water from the well, whereupon, according

to his own accounts, he experienced a *satori*—a transcendent moment of awakening or enlightenment—in which he felt himself to be one with the universe and was suffused with a deep sense of love and gratitude (Holiday, 2013; Leonard, 1999; Saotome, 1993). This experience transformed O-Sensei’s understanding of the purpose of *budo*. As he later put it: “True *budo* is a work of love. It is a work of giving life to all beings and not killing or struggling with each other” (as quoted in Holiday, 2013, p. 109), and,

The source of [*budo*] is the love of *kami* [the divine spirit in all things]. It is the spirit of love and protection for all. The training of *budo* forges in our minds and bodies the power of divine love, which produces, protects, and nurtures all things in the universe. The techniques of *budo* are signposts, pointing the way which leads to this. (as quoted in Holiday, 2013, p. 189)

O-Sensei devoted the remaining 45 years of his life to developing, refining, and teaching a new form of *budo*, “a *budo* of harmony and accord” (Ueshiba, 1985, p. 27), intended to give embodied expression to this new understanding that *budo*’s proper spirit and purpose “was not contention and domination but love” (Leonard, 1999, p. 7). By the early 1940s, he had begun calling this new art *aikido* (Holiday, 2013).

Ai means “unity,” “harmony,” or “accord”; or “to come into or bring into unity, harmony, or accord.” The most simple translation of the word *ki* might be “spirit” or “vitality,” or perhaps “life force,” but that doesn’t quite do justice to the subtleties and complexities of the concept. One teacher of mine, George Leonard Sensei (1999), described *ki* as a “vital energy associated with life and intentionality” (p. 83), and noted the existence of equivalent words and concepts in various other languages, such as “*chi* in Chinese, *prana* in Sanskrit, *pneuma* in

Greek” (p. 83). When aikido teachers instruct their students to perform an action “with *ki*,” they mean that the action should be performed with full commitment and with a quality of presence and attention that is both calmly centered and vibrantly expansive and alive; one major goal of aikido training is to cultivate the capacity to bring this quality to every action. Aikido teachers may also use the word *ki* to refer to a person’s intention or state of mind, or to the direction in which a person’s energies or attentions are focused, as in “sensing the attacker’s *ki*.” I have heard the expression “catch their *ki*” used interchangeably to mean both “recognize their intent” and “draw their attention.” The term *ki* is also used in a less personal and more cosmological context, to refer to “the vital essence of the universe” (Saotome, 1993, p. 149). Mitsugi Saotome Sensei (1993), a highly advanced aikido teacher who trained directly with O-Sensei for many years, wrote:

[*Ki*] is the activity of life, the essence of spirit. ... O-Sensei used the word *ki* in many different ways. He would refer to an aura as *ki*, and concentration was *ki*. Sometimes it was confidence, sometimes vitality, and sometimes strength. He used it to describe the universal energy force and many times to describe the function of God. So there is no complete answer to the question of what is *ki*. (pp. 149-150)

So there are many possible ways to translate or interpret the word aikido:

The way of harmony [with spirit/energy/life]; the way of bringing energies into harmony; the way of joining with the activity of the life force; the way of acting in accord with the spirit of the universe. These are just a few examples of the many translations I’ve heard from advanced aikido teachers over the years—all of which seem to be consistent with, and encompassed by, the conception of aikido

articulated by O-Sensei. In this conception, aikido aims to simultaneously serve multiple interconnected functions on multiple levels:

- a practical martial art in which one learns to deal gracefully with physical violence and bring attackers to the ground by “moving in unison” (Holiday, 2013, p. 149) with them;
- a path of personal growth and transformation intended to develop “balance, centeredness, and composure” (Leonard, 1999, p. x) and “cultivate a heart of love and a spirit of sincerity” (Holiday, 2013, p. 168);
- a spiritual path in which one seeks to “harmonize with the movement of the universe, and reach a state of spiritual oneness” (Holiday, 2013, p. 18) and to “joyfully engage in the tempering of the soul” (Ueshiba, 1985, p. 29);
- a way of transforming relationships and communities that promotes “harmony and good relations between people” (Holiday, 2013, p. 148) by training its practitioners to embody “personal integrity, love, and a spirit of deep harmony in all interactions, even when under attack” (p. 97); and
- a path toward the realization of O-Sensei’s unabashedly utopian vision, in which aikido contributes to the creation of a more peaceful, loving, and enlightened future for humanity by inspiring its practitioners to serve as agents of positive social change who bring the lessons and spirit of their training into the world at large: “In Aikido ...

we train in the hopes of being of some use, however small our role may be, in the task of bringing peace to mankind around the world. In this hope we become one with the Universal” (Ueshiba, 1985, p. 28).

Like most other aikido teachers with whom I’ve compared notes over the years, I’ve encountered numerous prospective aikido students who’ve read about the loving ideals and intentions underlying aikido and who become confused and sometimes alarmed when they finally visit an aikido dojo and see a roomful of sweaty people vigorously seizing each other and flinging each other to the ground. I don’t know what these prospective students are expecting aikido training to look like, but I suspect what they generally have in mind is closer to the slower and less intensely martial versions of taiji. Their confusion is understandable; for many who are unversed in the complexities of *budo*, it must be difficult to reconcile the intense violent play of aikido training with the talk of love, peace, and harmony. As George Leonard Sensei (1999) observed, aikido is “a martial art built on paradox” (p. 3).

One point that is crucial to reconciling this apparent contradiction is that while aikido is explicitly intended to serve as a path of liberation from paradigms of combativeness, competition, and domination (Crum, 1987; Heckler, 1984; Leonard, 1999, 2001), the pacifism of aikido is fundamentally different from the sort of total pacifism advocated by figures like Gandhi. A *budo* of love and harmony is still a *budo*—a warrior’s path—and the “spirit of love and protection” (Holiday, 2013, p. 189) that O-Sensei came to regard as the true spirit of *budo* is still a spirit of protection, however loving (Saotome, 1993). Aikidoka (aikido

practitioners) train to remain calm and centered in situations of conflict and potential violence, so that they can maintain a level of mindfulness that enables them to work toward creative and positive solutions—solutions in which, ideally, everyone involved is protected (Crum, 1987; Heckler, 1984; Leonard, 1999, 2001). But when others insist on perpetrating harm, oppression, and violence, aikidoka “are not expected to protect the attacker at the expense of their own lives or the lives of others” (Leonard, 1999, p. 149).

The choice to walk a path of *budo*—even a deeply compassionate form of *budo* like aikido—instead of a Gandhian path of total nonresistance to violence, is a choice to prioritize one’s own wellbeing and the wellbeing of innocents over the wellbeing of violent aggressors, and to cultivate the ability to act decisively and effectively in service to those priorities if the need arises. Thus there is no dogmatic injunction in aikido against harming violent aggressors—rather, there is a guiding spirit or principle of mindful compassion that encourages aikido practitioners to avoid doing any harm that is that is not essential to the task of protecting oneself and innocent others, or that is motivated by the urge to dominate rather than the spirit of protection (Heckler, 1984; Leonard, 1999; Saotome, 1993).

Most of the potential value and application of aikido to human life, however, has little to do with physical combat. Although it does have considerable practical utility in situations of physical violence and danger, aikido is intended to serve far broader and deeper purposes, as a path of personal and

social transformation (Crum, 1987; Dobson, 1993; Holiday, 2013; Leonard, 1999, 2001; Ueshiba, 1985).

Aikido On the Mat

Aikidoka often speak in terms of “on the mat” aikido and “off the mat” aikido, a reference to the fact that the floor of the training space in an aikido dojo is almost always padded with some form of mat so that the aikidoka don’t end up covered with bruises from all the falling down and rolling around that happens during a typical aikido class. “On the mat” aikido is aikido as it’s practiced during training sessions in an aikido dojo, and “off the mat” aikido is aikido as it’s practiced or applied in any other context (Leonard, 1999).

The fundamental focus of “on the mat” aikido training is the practice of dealing gracefully with physical attacks by working in harmony with the attacker’s *ki*—with the broad and versatile term *ki* referring, in this context, to a sort of aggregate of power, movement, and intention. This is, at its heart, a practice of mindfulness and connection: the only way to truly work in harmony with the partner’s *ki* is to deeply attend to the partner, to what is actually happening in the partner’s body from moment to moment (Leonard, 1999).

Because of this emphasis on moment-to-moment mindful connection and harmony between bodies, the bulk of “on the mat” aikido practice necessarily involves active physical engagement with practice partners. Unlike taiji or many other martial arts of East Asian origin, aikido has no *kata* or “forms”—that is, no extended sequences of prechoreographed movements that practitioners memorize and practice alone (Leonard, 1999). O-Sensei reasoned that if aikidoka focused on

training themselves to follow pre-established choreographies, their adherence to those choreographies might come to take precedence over mindful attunement and spontaneous responsiveness to what was actually happening in the present moment:

In Aikido, the techniques are constantly changing, for change and adaptability are part of the essence of Aikido. I am ... constantly altering the techniques according to the circumstances. Aikido has no forms. It has no forms because it is a study of the spirit. It is wrong to get caught up with forms. Doing so will make you unable to respond with the proper finesse. (Ueshiba, 2007, p. 15)

What aikido does have, instead of choreographed solo forms, is an extensive body of *waza*—a term commonly translated as “techniques”—which consist of brief, specific responses to a variety of attacks. The majority of aikido *waza* are designed to take the attacker’s balance and cause the attacker to either fall to the ground or go tumbling head-over-heels; some *waza* also end with the attacker being pinned—held on the ground in a more or less immobilized position. Performing aikido *waza* successfully and causing the attacker to fall or tumble is commonly referred to as “throwing” the attacker.

In keeping with the emphasis on adaptability and responsiveness to the present moment, the choreography of aikido *waza* is designed to be flexible. For instance, when a given *waza* calls for the aikidoka to turn their body in order to blend with the movement of an attack, there is room for a near-infinite range of potential variation in how the turn is executed—variation in how many degrees the aikidoka turns, in the speed and radius and force of the turn, in exactly how and where the aikidoka moves their feet in order to execute the turn, and in many other factors—so that each and every time the *waza* is performed, it can be

spontaneously adjusted to suit the needs of the unique moment that is unfolding between two unique bodies.

Generally, in partner practice during an aikido class, two aikidoka take turns playing the role of the attacker and the role of the person who performs the *waza* and “throws” the attacker. The aikidoka who is doing the throwing is referred to as *nage*, a term which means both “throw” and “thrower.” The aikidoka who attacks and gets thrown is referred to as *uke*, a term which means “person who receives”—in this context, the person who is on the receiving end of the throw (Leonard, 2001). The actions performed by *uke*, the attacks and falls and whatever physical interactions happen in between an attack and a fall, are referred to as *ukemi*. *Ukemi* can be described as either being “given” or “taken”: “She gave me some intense *ukemi*” means “She attacked me hard and fast,” while “I took some intense *ukemi*” means “I got thrown hard and fast.”

A typical aikido class begins with the students sitting in a row facing the front of the dojo space, in a kneeling position called *seiza*. The sensei (instructor) sits in *seiza* at the front of the dojo space and leads the class in a brief ritual of “bowing in,” in which the sensei and the students perform formal seated bows toward the front of the dojo space to honor the sanctity of the practice, and then the sensei and the students bow to one another.

After the sensei leads the class in various stretching and movement exercises, the students sit in *seiza* in a row again, and watch as the sensei demonstrates the first *waza* that the class will be practicing. This demonstration involves the sensei calling a student up to act as *uke*. The chosen *uke* attacks the

sensei in some specified way, and the sensei demonstrates the *waza*, throwing the *uke*. This demonstration of the *waza* is repeated multiple times, often at varying speeds, so that the students have the opportunity to see it from various angles and to take in as much visual information as possible about how it's done. The sensei will usually talk about the *waza* as well, emphasizing particular elements of it that the students should focus on in their practice.

Next, the students pair off in dyads and repeatedly practice the *waza* that the sensei just demonstrated. One partner in the dyad plays the role of *uke*, providing the attack, while the other partner plays the role of *nage*, performing the *waza* and attempting to throw or pin the *uke*. After the partner playing the role of *nage* has performed the *waza* four times, the two partners trade roles, and then continue to switch roles back and forth after every four repetitions of the *waza*. During this partnered practice, the sensei wanders around the mat, observing everyone's practice and providing instruction to individual students. When the sensei decides that this round of practice has gone on long enough, the sensei calls for the students to sit down again, and then demonstrates the next *waza*. The students pair off with new partners to practice the new *waza*. The bulk of the class time is spent in this way—multiple rounds of partnered practice of various *waza*.

Some classes also include training with weapons: the *bokken* and the *jo* (a short staff, about four and a half feet long). Practice with the *bokken* and *jo* is part of the roots of aikido: much of the basic style of posture, movement, and body alignment in aikido can be traced to O-Sensei's extensive early training with these

weapons, and working with them remains a valuable way for students to learn and polish good habits of aikido-style movement.

At advanced levels of training, classes include practice of *jiyu waza*, also called *freestyle* or *randori*. This is the part of training where all of the work on various *waza* is integrated and applied: the *uke* attacks in any way, coming at the *nage* over and over again with a variety of unpredictable grabs and strikes, and the *nage* seeks to spontaneously respond with whatever *waza* are appropriate in the moment. *Jiyu waza*, an intense and demanding experience for both *uke* and *nage*, is the closest that “on the mat” aikido training comes to actual combat. At more advanced levels, aikidoka practice *jiyu waza* with two or more *uke* attacking them simultaneously.

At the end of class, the sensei and the students “bow out,” thanking one another for the practice with formal seated bows.

Aikido Off the Mat

One possible translation of the character *do* in the words *budo* and *aikido* is “way of life” (Leonard, 1999, p. 7), and aikido is most certainly intended to be a way of life, “a way of being in the world” (Heckler, 1985, p. 3). The principles and dynamics of aikido translate “into surprisingly effective guidelines for living” (Leonard, 1999, p. 20) with “nearly endless applications ... for every aspect of [one’s] physical, emotional, social, and spiritual life” (p. ix). “Off the mat” aikido thus comprises a potentially infinite array of activities, because “off the mat” aikido consists of endeavoring to bring the principles, intentions, and strategies of aikido into embodiment in the way that one engages with every activity,

relationship, or situation (Crum, 1987; Dobson, 1993; Holiday, 2013; Heckler, 1984, 1985; Leonard, 1999).

Some prospective students, mostly young males, come to the aikido dojo with their heads full of violent fantasies about using aikido techniques to overcome attackers “on the street” (I’ve lost count of the number of times I’ve heard such students use the specific phrase “on the street” in this context; whatever street these people are talking about, I’m certainly glad I don’t live on it). At first, it often seems that this is the only form of “off the mat” aikido that these students can imagine. Many of them don’t stick around—they seem disconcerted by the way aikido challenges their accustomed paradigms of combativeness and domination—but those who do persist in their training for any significant length of time soon start to discover a world of other possible applications of aikido that are far more creative and transformative than beating people up.

My wife, a fellow aikido *yudansha* (black-belt-level practitioner) who also teaches in my dojo, was talking to one of these young male prospective students before a class one evening, and he asked her if she’d ever used aikido outside of the dojo.

“All the time,” she said.

“Really?” he said.

“Totally,” she said. “The other day my husband and I were putting together our new couch in the living room. And the instructions weren’t clearly written, so the project got really tangled and confused. But we both stayed calm

and centered, and we stayed attuned to each other with love, so eventually we got it all sorted out without getting caught up in stress and frustration. And now we have a comfortable couch that doesn't have stressful memories attached to it."

The young man was utterly baffled by this, because of course in his mind "using aikido outside the dojo" could only mean using it in physical combat. But most adults, unless they live in war zones, probably encounter potentially stressful domestic challenges a lot more often than they encounter physical combat. And to people like me and my wife—both of us survivors of extensive childhood trauma—having a loving and harmonious domestic life that isn't thrown into emotional havoc by minor difficulties seems a far more valuable and wondrous result of our aikido training than merely being able to take down a would-be mugger.

Aikido as a Transformative Somatic Practice

Aikido is not a philosophy, ideology, or collection of abstract principles, but an embodied way of being in the world. To speak of "the principles of aikido" is to speak not of some list of principles or rules that O-Sensei explicitly spelled out in a book, but rather of principles that one gradually comes to know and embody through the experience of practice. Any attempt at articulating those principles in words would be inadequate to convey the nuances of that embodied experience. Aikido, like any transformative somatic practice, is not something one thinks, believes, or professes, but something one does, which can only be truly known through the process of doing. Thus aikido is a specifically somatic form of transformative practice—that is to say, the transformative psychospiritual lessons

of aikido are learned first and foremost through the body (Heckler, 1984; Holiday, 2013; Leonard, 1999, 2001). O-Sensei frequently reminded his students of the embodied nature of the art, with statements such as, “This is not mere theory. You practice it” (as quoted in Holiday, 2013, p. 177), or, “Those who train in Aikido must never forget that the teaching has to be forged in one’s very body” (as quoted in Holiday, 2013, p. 175).

But how does the practice of aikido function as a path of psychospiritual transformation? How does “on the mat” aikido translate into “off the mat” aikido? How is it that spending a few hours in the dojo each week being attacked by one’s fellow aikidoka and throwing them to the ground can serve as an effective means of cultivating such qualities as “personal integrity, love, and a spirit of deep harmony in all interactions” (Holiday, 2013, p. 97)? While numerous advanced aikidoka have attested to the powerful transformative effects of long-term aikido training (e.g., Dobson, 1993; Holiday, 2013; Leonard, 1985, 1999, 2001; W. Palmer, 2002; Saotome, 1993), for an explanation of how aikido training can have such benefits one must turn to the field of somatic psychology. The use of somatic psychology as a lens for understanding the transformative mechanisms and capacities of aikido was originally explored by my fellow aikido teacher Richard Heckler (1984) in *The Anatomy of Change: East/West Approaches to Body/Mind Therapy*.

The field of somatic psychology—also referred to as somatics, body psychotherapy, or body-oriented psychotherapy—encompasses a domain of theory and praxis that is both diverse and constantly evolving (Johnson, 2018).

What unites, underlies, and defines the field can arguably be boiled down to two fundamental theoretical principles, and it is these two principles that are the key to understanding how a practice such as aikido can effect profound psychospiritual growth and transformation.

The first principle of somatic psychology is that the psyche is constructed and organized somatically; the organization and functioning of the psyche or self is inextricably entwined with the organization and habitual usage of the body (Grand, 1978, 1982, 1998, 2006, 2012, 2015a, 2015b; Heckler, 1984; Kepner, 2001; Reich, 1933/1972; E. W. L. Smith, 1985; Van der Kolk, 2014, 2015). From a somatically oriented perspective, “the self or ‘I’ is an embodied self” (Kepner, 2001, pp. 9–10), and the body is “the site of psychic enactment” (Grand, 2012, p. 544) and “the site of psychic structuring of both possibility and difficulty” (Grand, 2015b, p. 211). Experience, awareness, attitudes, sense of self, and capacities for feeling and action are enabled and restricted, shaped and delimited, by ingrained and largely unconscious habits of bodily usage—habits of tension, relaxation, posture, breathing, movement, gesture, excitation, and expression (Grand, 1978, 1982, 1998, 2006, 2012, 2015b; Heckler, 1984; Kepner, 2001).

The second principle follows from the first: if the organization and functioning of the psyche is grounded in the organization and habitual usage of the body, then by intentionally altering the habitual organization and usage of the body in specific ways it is possible to effect profound transformations of the psyche (Grand, 1978, 1982, 1998, 2015a, 2015b; Heckler, 1984; Kepner, 2001; E. W. L. Smith, 1985). Although rarely articulated so explicitly by aikido teachers, it

is this fundamental principle that underlies the transformative potentials of aikido and other somatic practices (Heckler, 1984).

In addition to these two fundamental principles, there is a third key concept in somatic psychology that is of particular relevance to understanding the transformative capacities of aikido. This is the idea that any given person's habitual organization and usage of the body includes specific, habitual, automatic, and largely unconscious modes of bodily reaction to real or perceived crises and threats (Grand, 2015b; Heckler, 1984; Kepner, 2001; E. W. L. Smith, 1985). These habitual modes of reactivity, which initially come into being as unconscious strategies of self-protection in response to the stresses and crises that arise in the course of a person's development, become ingrained in the everyday structure of the person's embodiment (Grand, 1978, 1982, 1998, 2006, 2015b; Kepner, 2001; E. W. L. Smith, 1985). These chronic defensive qualities of bodily structuring have been referred to by such terms as "character armor" (Reich, 1933/1972), "character structure" (Reich, 1933/1972), or "adaptive body structure" (Kepner, 2001).

It is in moments of particular stress or crisis that these defensive modes of embodiment become most fully active and most intensely pronounced in their manifestation (Heckler, 1984). Thus, as one might reasonably expect, one of the surest ways to activate any person's habitual defensive modes and bring them into full manifestation is to place that person under direct physical attack (Heckler, 1984; Leonard, 1999). When physically grabbed by an attacker during aikido practice, Heckler (1984) writes:

Our reaction to this physical grab is the same reaction we have to other forms of pressure, mental, emotional, or interpersonal. It's not as if we have a whole repertoire of tricks and reactions, but rather we have a single response that we have [unconsciously] developed and refined. ... So this grab can be an actual event with an actual energetic response (someone literally grabbing you), and, at the same time, it can tell us who we are in the world, in our daily life situations. It can bring to light in a bodily sense the way we connect with and withdraw from ourself, others, and the environment. It's a research experiment with ourself as the laboratory. (p. 26)

In the laboratory of the aikido dojo, one is continually provided with the opportunity to experience the activation of one's own personal embodied defensive habits and character structure, "under a magnifying glass" (Leonard, 1999, p. 166):

Subtle personality quirks are made large and clear. Hidden agendas come quickly to light. Every attempt at overreaching is revealed in sharp relief. After you've been doing the art for a while, it's amazing how much you can learn about people simply by how they grasp your wrist or by their reaction when you grasp theirs. Episodes of childhood trauma loudly announce themselves by the way a person's head shrinks back and to the side as a partner's hand comes near. Inability to express emotions proclaims itself in bodily rigidity. (p. 166)

Each attack by one's practice partners on the aikido mat provides one not only with the opportunity to witness one's own reactive habits of defensive embodiment, but, more importantly, with the opportunity to work on intentionally overriding those habits and replacing them with new modes of embodied response that are more conscious and more conducive to mindful, harmonious, open-hearted navigation of life and its challenges. This intentional overwriting of ingrained reactive habits with new habits of mindful responsiveness is a key element in aikido's power to effect long-term personal transformation (Heckler, 1984; Leonard, 1999).

A distinctive quality of aikido is that graceful and effective performance of aikido *waza* is dependent on the aikidoka maintaining a continuous state of sensitive attunement to both themselves and their partner. This attunement must include, at a minimum, simultaneous awareness of the bodies and the ever-shifting balance, tensions, movements, momentum, power, energetic state, and attentional focus of both self and other—while both are in rapid motion (Holiday, 2013; Leonard, 1999, 2001). “Size and strength don’t count as much as your ability to tune in to your attackers’ intentions and momentum, then move in just such a way as to become one with them” (Leonard, 1999, p. 49). In order to attune at such a level, one must learn to relax and release bodily tensions, lest those tensions interfere with one’s sensitivity. Aikido is “a tactile, intimate art” (p. 166), and any superfluous bodily rigidity and reactivity, any tendency to tense defensively or to aggressively exert excess muscular force, will inevitably get in the way of one’s capacity feel the subtleties of what’s happening in a practice partner’s body.

So one learns, in aikido practice—through constant mindful effort and many repeated attempts over months, years, and decades—to relax and let go of superficial excess tensions, and to guide the movements of attackers harmoniously through sensitive tactile awareness instead of shrinking away from the attackers or attempting to clumsily wrestle them to the ground with brute force (Holiday, 2013). Having gained some ability to do this, however, one soon discovers that the grace and effectiveness of one’s performance of aikido *waza* is still limited by another layer of tensions and rigidities—a deeper, more

chronically held layer, of which one may not have been particularly aware until one began to shed the more superficial tensions. And so one begins to work at releasing that deeper layer of tension, only to discover beneath it a still deeper layer. Thus, over many years of diligent training, an aikidoka discovers and learns to release progressively deeper layers of armor (Holiday, 2013)—and, even more importantly, to access and maintain the condition of sensitive, relaxed, de-armored presence even while responding to fast-moving situations of direct pressure and attack (Heckler, 1984; Holiday, 2013).

In keeping with the somatic psychology principle that the chronic rigidities of character armor are the embodied means by which chronic unconscious rigidities and limiting patterns of the psyche are enacted and maintained (Grand, 1978, 1982, 1998, 2012, 2015b; Heckler, 1984; Kepner, 2001; Reich, 1933/1972; E. W. L. Smith, 1985), the liberation of the aikido practitioner's bodily organization and responses from layers of chronically held character armor has the potential to be a liberation of the self—a liberation of both body and psyche from chronically held, limiting patterns of trauma and fear, “contention and domination” (Leonard, 1999, p. 7), reactivity, and what O-Sensei called “the mind of discord” (as quoted in Moon, 1985, p. 116). In the words of Motomichi Anno Sensei, a former apprentice of O-Sensei and the most luminously wise and radiantly heartfelt aikido teacher I have ever had the honor of encountering in person:

I believe that every person's heart naturally shines. ... Aikido training is a way of taking off the layers that cover up what is inside. If each of us could shed those layers, we would all shine with the same light. (as quoted in Holiday, 2013, p. 159)

A World That Didn't Want Me

Prior to the beginning of my aikido training, my childhood largely followed a pattern of experience that is commonplace in autobiographical or autoethnographic accounts of the childhoods of many fellow autistics (e.g., Asasumasu, 2012, 2013a; Jackson, 2002; S. R. Jones, 2013, 2016; Kim, 2015; Lawson, 2000; Prince-Hughes, 2004, 2013; Monje, 2012, 2016a; Mukhopadhyay, 2015; Robison, 2008; Willey, 1999; D. Williams, 1998, 1999). As a child, I was quite content when left to my own devices to follow my natural inclinations toward learning and creative engagement with the world, in ways that suited my particular neurocognitive style and developmental needs—stimming, and later other forms of creative exploration like reading and art. But I was never left to my own devices as much as I would have liked. Instead, every day was an extended series of baffling, stressful, and traumatic situations in which nearly every person I encountered—other kids, my parents, my teachers and other employees of the school system—rejected, shamed, punished, and abused me psychologically and physically for being different, for being not-normal, for needing more time to process and understand things than the other kids needed, for failing to meet neurotypical norms of cognition, behavior, speech, and interaction.

Conforming to all those norms, while simultaneously trying to navigate the incessant and pervasive demands of the non-autistic world at the sort of pace that was demanded of me, would have been impossible for me even if I'd understood what the norms actually were—which I didn't, because, as most autistic children discover, the first rule of non-autistic social interaction is that no

one explains the rules, and the second rule is that anyone who asks for a clear explanation of the rules gets abused instead of being given helpful answers. So my overall experience throughout my childhood, except when I was alone, remained one of bewildered daily floundering under an overwhelming bombardment of confusing noise, incomprehensible demands, constant inexplicable hostility, and frequent, seemingly random eruptions of verbal or physical violence that could come from anyone around me at any moment (Walker, 2018).

No aspect of these experiences—not the inability to meet the endless rigid demands of neuronormative performance, nor the implacable hostility and daily abuse I encountered from both children and adults, nor the psychological and physical impact all of this had upon me—is in any way uncommon in the lived experience of young autistic people. Indeed, based on both my extensive readings of the growing body of autistic autobiography and autoethnography, and many hundreds of conversations I’ve witnessed or participated in over the course of almost two decades of involvement in autistic communities, I’d venture to say that this general pattern of developmental experience represents the norm, more or less, for autistic childhoods in modern-day North America, in my generation and the generations that have come after. The particulars of each individual childhood differ, of course, but the basics are remarkably consistent (e.g., Asasumasu, 2012, 2013a; Jackson, 2002; S. R. Jones, 2013, 2016; Kim, 2015; Prince-Hughes, 2004; Monje, 2012, 2016a). To grow up autistic is to grow up in a world that doesn’t want one—a world where the mass media, politicians across the political

spectrum, giant money-grubbing “autism charities” run by non-autistics, and often one’s own family speak of one’s very existence as a “tragedy,” a “burden,” and an “epidemic.” I’ve found that most non-autistics, including non-autistic professionals who work with autistic clients, have very little understanding of just how much traumatic abuse the vast majority of autistics experience in childhood, adolescence, and beyond (Walker, 2018).

The overall unpleasantness and severity of trauma, of course, varies with each individual childhood—depending, for instance, on whether the child’s home life offers any degree of sanctuary from the hostile environment of the outside world. My own home life offered no such sanctuary: both my parents were the products of extended family histories of violent trauma, and I grew up in a crime-ridden, low-income housing project with a negligent father whose post-traumatic stress made him prone to explosive outbursts of rage and physical violence, and an equally negligent mother whose poor boundaries, chronic dissociation, and intractable untrustworthiness made her at least as unsafe a caregiver as her volatile husband. On the other hand, I was spared the abusive “treatments” and “therapies” for autism which have traumatized so many young autistic people (e.g., Asasumasu, 2013a, 2013b; Bascom, 2012; Dawson, 2004; S. R. Jones, 2016; Kupferstein, 2018; A. Williams, 2018; Yergeau, 2018)—partly because I was born at a time when such things were considerably less widespread, and partly because my parents had good reason to avoid inviting close professional scrutiny of our home life. So I’d say that on the whole, the level of trauma and

alienation I experienced ended up being more or less average for a modern autistic childhood.

Following in the Footsteps of Rydra Wong

By the time I turned 12, the accumulated stress and trauma of my childhood had taken a severe psychological and physical toll on me. I was depressed, wracked with tension. Pale, anemic, and skeletally thin, I was often unable to eat due to ulcers and other stress-induced digestive problems. My posture was hunched, shoulders up and head down, always curling inward as if to shield myself from the unrelenting rain of abuse. I was plagued with headaches, illnesses, obsessive-compulsive symptoms, and an assortment of nervous tics and twitches. Perpetually strained beyond all reasonable limits by the constant stress, and short on healthy psychological resources and self-regulation skills thanks to a childhood almost entirely devoid of safety, stability, or nurturance, I was emotionally volatile and easily triggered into spirals of anxiety, rage, or suicidal despair. Much of the time, all that kept me alive was sheer stubborn defiance: the world didn't want me, so as long as I stayed alive the world didn't get to win (Walker, 2018).

My experience first began to significantly diverge from the standard pattern of modern North American autistic childhoods when I made a decision, at the age of 12, to start fighting back physically against bullying and abuse—to always fight back, regardless of odds or consequences. This decision almost immediately improved my life: in addition to giving me a new self-respect and partially alleviating my psychosomatic stress symptoms, it got me expelled from

junior high school and sent to a small school for “emotionally disturbed” and “socially maladjusted” youth where I was less overwhelmed and where I was finally able to make friends. Nonetheless, it quickly became apparent that if a scrawny, sickly kid like me was going to be getting into fights all the time, I was going to need some sort of training to improve my fighting skills or I’d soon get myself seriously injured or killed.

It was early 1981, and back in those days there weren’t nearly as many martial arts schools around as there are today. My options were further limited by youth, poverty, and having to get around on foot. This narrowed the field to only two accessible choices: karate and aikido, both offered at the local YMCA.

For a few years preceding this moment of choice, the boys in my neighborhood—including some of the boys who’d bullied me and with whom I was now frequently getting into fights—had been great fans of karate, or at least karate as portrayed in the popular movies of the day. Although none of them had any actual karate training, they all claimed to be experts in it. Their attempts to demonstrate their alleged expertise, by yelling “Hiyaaa!” and kicking each other, tended to devolve into ludicrous brawls. My impression of what karate was about was somewhat tainted by all this—which was admittedly unfair to the noble art of karate and its actual serious practitioners, but I didn’t have that level of perspective at age 12.

I’d only ever heard of aikido from one source. Around the same time that I was making the decision to take up a martial art, I read Samuel R. Delany’s (1966) science-fiction novel *Babel-17*. Delany’s books had a profound impact and

influence on me in my early adolescence because they were among the first books I found in which weird misfits like me—characters explicitly portrayed as unabashedly neurodivergent and queer—were shown in a positive light and could be protagonists rather than villains or comic relief or colorful props.

At one point in *Babel-17* (Delany, 1966), it was mentioned in passing that the heroine—a spaceship captain and poet named Rydra Wong—held a black belt in aikido. Interestingly, at another point in the book, the psychotherapist who treated Wong for post-traumatic stress when she was a child notes that she was autistic. Wong’s autism, like her proficiency in aikido, was mentioned only once in the entire book, in passing, and not delved into further. But in retrospect, I realize now that in addition to being where I first heard of aikido, *Babel-17* was also first place I ever saw the word *autistic* in print. The forward-thinking Delany had conceived of a character who was an autistic aikido black belt more than two decades before I became, to the best of my knowledge, the first one to exist in real life.

The entirety of my lived experience up to that point, and nearly everything I’d ever read and every movie or television show I’d ever seen, had taught me that human society was characterized by a ubiquitous divide between a brutish and ignorant majority and a small minority of interesting weirdoes. And one of the few things in life that I knew with absolute certainty was which side of that divide I would always be on. So when I was faced with a choice between studying a martial art that was admired by the crudest and most ignorant of my peers, or studying a martial art that was practiced by an autistic spaceship captain in an

intriguing novel by a brilliant queer science-fiction author, I didn't have too hard a time making up my mind.

Entering the Dojo

It turned out that the aikido classes being offered at my local YMCA were brand new. They'd just started registering students; classes weren't even in session yet. So I got to be at the very first aikido class ever held in or near my hometown of Princeton, New Jersey. Aikido was a lot less widespread back in those days.

It also turned out that the aikido program was meant for ages 16 and up—but the person who was working at the registration desk hadn't been aware of this when I signed up, and once my name was on the roster no one questioned it. So that first class consisted of the two instructors, 12-year-old me, and somewhere between 14 and 16 adults and near-adults who were almost all just as new to aikido as I was.

The Princeton YMCA was relatively small as YMCA facilities go. Eventually, after a couple of years of growing popularity, the aikido program would be relocated to the basketball court—the largest space in the building—and provided with folding mats that could be velcroed together to cover most of the floor. But in those earliest days, the aikido classes were held in a room called the Light Exercise Room. I never did find out what other sorts of exercise people did in the Light Exercise Room besides aikido, but the room was about 25 feet by 40 feet and was kept completely empty except for a punching bag hanging in one corner. There were no mats, but at least the floor was carpeted wall-to-wall.

I stepped into the room, where there were already a few other new students milling about, chatting and stretching. My experience of stepping into that room as a 12-year-old autistic kid with an extensive history of abuse and trauma was in all likelihood vastly different from the experience of anyone else who entered the room for that evening's aikido class. To begin with, my basic sensory experience was probably quite different from that of any of my non-autistic fellow aikidoka. One manifestation of the intensity and complexity of my autistic sensory experience is that it often takes me a few seconds to chunk the initial flood of sensory impressions into a coherent perception of a new space (see the sections of Chapter 2 entitled "Autistic Perception" and "Benefits of Autistic Perception," for an explanation of this phenomenon and of the concept of chunking). The Light Exercise Room was one of those spaces that took longer than average for me to chunk. Among other things, the fluorescent lights in the drop ceiling gave exactly the sort of illumination that tends to interfere with my visual orientation, and they flickered rapidly in a way that I've since learned is imperceptible to most non-autistic people. And the lights were noisy on two different levels: the actual buzzing sounds they made (also probably imperceptible to most non-autistic people), with different lights buzzing at different pitches; and also the way that my autistic synesthesia caused the visual stimulation of the light to bleed into other sensory channels, including both the auditory and the tactile.

The need to spend a few seconds calibrating my senses to a new space due to the dynamics of autistic perception did not, on its own, necessarily have to constitute a problem for me. And yet it was indeed an enormous problem for me

throughout my childhood, because the many non-autistic people in my world who took it upon themselves to be the enforcers of neuronormative performance consistently chose to make it a problem. People—a great many people everywhere I went, from complete strangers to teachers and kids whom I encountered at school every week—simply would not allow me take the brief moments of time I needed to orient myself. To spend a moment doing nothing at all except for allowing oneself time to organize information is a violation of neuronormativity, a social taboo in the neurotypical world. Literally unspeakable, insofar as it is an action for which neurotypical language provides no adequate word that I know of. At best, there are neologisms like chunking, which attempt to describe the internal process involved. More commonly, neurotypicals describe autistics who are performing such an action as being “in their own world”—one of the core autistiphobic stereotypes in neurotypical culture—or, more colloquially, as “spacing out.” Both of these common descriptors are reflective of the dominant culture’s hostility toward anyone who commits such a violation of neurotypical social norms, and of the neurotypical proclivity for observing the outward behavior of autistic people and coming to grossly incorrect conclusions about our internal processes.

So from early childhood onward, I found myself constantly subject to intrusion, interruption, derision, unsolicited concern, nonconsensual touch, and other forms of unwanted attention, almost immediately upon entering any new place or at any other time at which I needed a moment to chunk my sensory

experience and orient myself. Years of this had taught me to feel a good deal of anxiety about entering a new space with people in it.

This anxiety was compounded by another aspect of my childhood social experience: when entering a new situation, I never understood what the rules were, whereas everyone else always seemed to magically know the rules already. This phenomenon is a ubiquitous and widely documented part of autistic childhood and adolescent experience—and in many cases autistic experience throughout the lifespan (e.g., Endow, 2012; Jackson, 2002; S. R. Jones, 2013, 2016; Monje, 2012, 2015, 2016a; Myles, Trautman, & Schelvan, 2004; Prince-Hughes, 2004). The seemingly endless sets of largely unwritten and unspoken social rules governing every social and cultural environment and activity—rules which neurotypicals tend to pick up on far more readily than autistics—have been referred to by some writers on autism as “the hidden curriculum” (e.g., Endow, 2012; Myles et al., 2004). The vast majority of autistic people in modern society spend their lives—especially their youths—being constantly misjudged, punished, abused, and rejected for not understanding this hidden curriculum.

High levels of anxiety in general, and social anxiety in particular, seem to be near-pandemic in the autistic population. Within the pathology paradigm, this anxiety is spoken of as an intrinsic “symptom” of autism (e.g., Grandin, 2006). I’m more inclined to see it as a natural and obvious result of the sociocultural experiences of autistic people in the modern world. When people who are naturally sensitive and have a natural proclivity for pattern recognition are subjected to a persistent pattern of experience starting in early childhood, in

which nearly every social situation involves being abused and treated as “bad” for reasons that are never clear (asking for clarification gets one punished; autistics who can speak learn that very early in life), then anxiety—social anxiety in particular—is the obvious result, and requires no further explanation. To be born autistic in the modern world is to be sentenced to live in a Franz Kafka story.

So I stepped into the Light Exercise Room for my first aikido class with low expectations as to how I would be welcomed. The only things that got me in the door were the spark of reckless “nothing to lose” courage I’d recently acquired through my decision to always go down fighting, and a wild intimation—a sort of vague fantasy that I couldn’t have consciously articulated at the time—to the effect that by embarking on the study of this exotic art that I’d only seen mentioned in a Samuel Delany (1966) novel, I could somehow transport myself from the Kafkaesque reality in which I had been living, into the better, weirder, enticingly queer and beautiful and welcoming reality inhabited by Delany’s characters. As it turned out, that’s essentially what did end up happening, gradually, over the course of the many ensuing years.

In that first moment, though, what happened was that as I stepped in through the doorway and stopped to chunk the room, a short woman wearing a white *gi* (practice uniform) and black *hakama* (long skirt-like pants) strode up with a clipboard in one hand, stood right next to me, and said, “When you enter the dojo, face the front of the room and bow like this.” She demonstrated the bow, and I imitated it.

“Good,” she said. “What’s your name?” I told her my name, and she found it on the clipboard and put a check mark next to it.

“Once you bow into the dojo, the first thing you do is take your shoes and socks off,” she said. “You can leave them over there.” She pointed to the area to the left of the door where several other pairs of shoes with socks stuffed into them were already lined up with their toes to the wall.

I started to turn away to go take off my shoes, but she quickly held up a finger and said, “But first... in an aikido dojo, when a sensei gives you an instruction, you say ‘Hai, Sensei,’ and bow to them.”

So I said, “Hai, Sensei,” and bowed, and she bowed back.

“Good,” she said with a nod, and she turned and walked away to talk to someone else.

This was my introduction to Roni Sensei, one of my two first aikido teachers; the other teacher was her husband, Dave Sensei. In the coming years I learned—largely from how my fellow aikido students talked about her outside of practice—that by neurotypical standards of social behavior Roni Sensei was exceedingly brusque and blunt in her style of interaction. By my own standards, though, that first interaction as I came in the door was one of the best social experiences I’d ever had. I’d walked into a new social environment and someone had immediately come up and told me what the rules were. And the rules had been clear and simple, and I hadn’t been expected to already know them, and I hadn’t been rejected or abused, and apparently I wasn’t even in any trouble. Compared to my usual experiences walking into new social environments, I might

as well have just walked in through the gates of Heaven and been embraced by an angel.

Dojo Etiquette as Organic Social Accommodation

Certain forms of transformative practice, including aikido and most other martial arts, involve communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) that come together to engage in their practices in group settings. These communities and settings tend to have their own distinctive and microcultures with their own distinctive rules and traditions of conduct and etiquette. No one, regardless of their neurocognitive style, comes into this sort of specialized microculture already knowing the rules, and thus there exists a general understanding that every novice coming in the door for the first time is going to need the rules of etiquette spelled out for them during the early stages of their participation in the community.

Having the rules explicitly spelled out from the start is an accommodation that many autistics wish was provided in all social contexts (Endow, 2012; Myles et al., 2004); this certainly was and still is the case for me, and it's a wish I've heard expressed by numerous other autistic people over the years. It's an accommodation that's rarely granted, in most social contexts. Until I entered the world of aikido, my experience, without exception, had been that asking to have social rules spelled out clearly was in itself a violation of unspoken social rules—a violation to which others often reacted with a bewildering level of hostility. But in the aikido dojo, the rules were spelled out quite clearly and explicitly, because the rules were so different from ordinary outside-the-dōjo social rules that even the neurotypicals needed them spelled out.

In the course of trying to survive within the dominant culture, “Follow the Rules and Avoid Getting Targeted for Breaking Them” is a particularly unenjoyable social game at which many autistic people are forced to expend much of their energy and attention, and much of their lives, and at which they still generally lose (Endow, 2012; Monje, 2012, 2015, 2016a; Myles et al., 2004; Prince-Hughes, 2004). But the specialized microculture of the aikido dojo, where the rules were clearly stated and new to everyone, offered a level playing field—and thus an opportunity to finally do well at the game. In fact, I had an advantage: my non-autistic fellow students were well-habituated to the social rules and etiquette of the dominant culture, and were not at all accustomed to not having to give a great deal of mindful, conscious thought to such things. I, on the other hand, had never become well-habituated to neurotypical social rules, social rituals, and etiquette. Instead, like so many other autistics, I was long accustomed to having to exercise constant mindfulness and vigilance when it came to following such rules of social etiquette. Following a new set of strict and alien rules was apparently a lot harder for my neurotypical fellow students than following the rules to which they’d become acculturated over the course of years. Indeed, that’s the central purpose of the elaborate rules and rituals of etiquette in the aikido dojo: the cultivation of mindfulness (Dobson, 1993). For me, on the other hand, following the dojo rules was considerably less difficult and demanding than what I was accustomed to when it came to dealing with rules of social etiquette and interaction, since the dojo rules were explicitly taught and I

could simply focus on following them instead of having to constantly try to figure out what they were.

Thus, dojo etiquette served the unintended purpose of enabling my participation by functioning as an accommodation for my social needs—a far more graceful and effective accommodation for an autistic participant, in fact, than any intentional attempt at accommodation I’ve ever seen anyone attempt to implement in any setting. One might call such a phenomenon an *organic accommodation*: a situation in which a system that arose for other reasons happens serendipitously to function as a perfect accommodation for the needs of a specific participant or population of participants who come along after the system has already been established.

These days, I see this same phenomenon occur in my own dojo. Most neurotypical students need at least a few reminders—and often a lot more than just a few—before they start consistently remembering any given piece of etiquette, like when and where to bow. Many autistic students only need to be given each etiquette instruction once, as was the case for me when I first started my aikido training. Clearly spelled out systems, rules, and rituals of formal etiquette not only make certain transformative practices accessible to autistic practitioners, they can also make such practices a haven. And those autistic practitioners who, like me, are quickly able to grasp elaborate systems of etiquette and remember them—and find beauty in them—can serve as a model and guide for beginning practitioners, as I eventually did in my capacity as a senior student after my first few years of training.

The Aesthetics of Emergence

On that first day in the dojo, as the starting time for class drew near, Roni Sensei got the students lined up side-by-side, kneeling in *seiza*, facing the wall that had been designated as the front of the room. We waited in *seiza* as a few stragglers came in and were directed to bow in and join the line. When the start time came, Dave Sensei stepped up to the front of the room and led the class in the standard ritual bows (there's a lot of bowing in aikido, including the standing bow performed upon entering the dojo, and the seated bows done by the whole class together to mark the beginning of class; both of these bowing rituals are referred to as "bowing in"). He then led us through the series of stretching and movement exercises with which every class was to begin.

After those warmup exercises, Dave Sensei had everyone line up to practice the over-the-shoulder rolls that aikidoka perform when thrown in ways that might otherwise lead to especially hard or awkward landings. Performing these rolls is one of the most difficult skills for beginning aikido students to learn; once mastered, they're one of the most fun parts of aikido training, but early efforts at rolling tend to be quite awkward and uncomfortable for nearly every student. This was certainly the case for me; my skinny and dyspraxic 12-year-old body, all bones and angles, rolled like a pile of tangled coat hangers. On my very first attempt at a roll, I somehow managed to hit myself in the eye with my own knee, which now makes a good story to tell new students who are embarrassed and the awkwardness of their own attempts at rolling. (The challenges posed by

dyspraxia in the early years of my aikido training are explored further in the next section of this chapter.)

Once the rolling practice was complete, we all sat in *seiza* again and Dave Sensei and Roni Sensei demonstrated the first *waza* we would be practicing in dyads, a *waza* which I later learned was called *gyakute tori irimi nage* (which translates as “cross-hand grab [leading to] entering throw”—the first part of the name of an aikido *waza* describes the attack, and the second part describes the response). Roni Sensei, playing the role of *uke*, reached out to seize Dave Sensei by the wrist. But just as her hand was about to close around his wrist, he raised and extended his arm with just the right timing that her intention to grab it caused her to slightly overextend herself. At the same time, in that brief instant in which she was overextended and her attention was committed to the grab for his wrist, he stepped behind her, with casual ease, so that the arm for which she’d been grabbing was the only part of his body still in her field of vision. As she pivoted to find him and continue trying to attack, he stepped further behind her and brought the same arm up and then down again in a big wave-like arc, which intersected the arc of her movement in precisely the right time and place to bring her to the ground. That whole interaction of bodies took maybe two or three seconds. Then Roni Sensei rolled smoothly back to her feet and grabbed at Dave Sensei’s other wrist, and the *waza* was repeated. They repeated the performance of the *waza* several more times, switching roles so that sometimes it was Dave Sensei throwing Roni Sensei and sometimes the other way round.

Although my fellow novice aikidoka and I were all watching the same demonstration, the same movement of bodies in space, I suspect that there was a great deal of variation among us in terms of our subjective experiences of what we witnessed. To explain my own experience of witnessing the performance of aikido *waza* for the first time, it's necessary at this point to revisit and further elaborate upon certain aspects of autistic perception and cognition that I touch on in Chapter 2.

In the sections of Chapter 2 entitled “Autistic Perception” and “Benefits of Autistic Perception,” I discuss how “autistic perception tends to dwell in the shaping” (Manning, 2013, p. 177)—how the distinctive qualities of autistic perception often result in autistic people having conscious experience of the perceptual and cognitive processes by which the “great blooming, buzzing confusion” (James, 1890/2007, p. 488) of the field of sensory information is organized or chunked into coherent order. A significant portion of autistic conscious experience is experience of the liminal zone of “morphability” (Manning, 2013, p. 219) in which order is forever in the process of emerging from chaos. And because the world itself—and thus the informational/relational field itself—is forever in flux and motion, this morphability never fully resolves itself into the world of fixed and discrete objects that I have so frequently heard described by neurotypical persons in their accounts of their own experiences of “reality.” Instead, the fundamental distinguishing characteristic of autistic subjective reality is that it is reality in a perpetual state of emergence, in which

fluid and ever-changing dynamic constellations, living patterns and systems, are continually in the process of resolving into coherence (Manning, 2013).

Also in Chapter 2, in the section entitled “Autistic Psychospiritual Potentials,” I note that a substantial body of anecdotal evidence points toward the possibility that exceptional capacities for certain types of transpersonal experience (Daniels, 2013; Grof, 2000; Walsh & Vaughan, 1993) or peak experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990/2008; Maslow, 1968, 1971) might occur at a higher rate in the autistic population than in the overall human population (Bogdashina, 2010, 2013). As I mention in that section, the varieties of transpersonal or peak experience most commonly reported by autistics included states of transcendent bliss induced by the apprehension of aesthetic beauty (e.g., Bogdashina, 2010, 2013; Mukhopadhyay, 2003, 2008; Prince-Hughes, 2013; Sequenzia, 2015a, 2015b; D. Williams, 1998, 1999).

I can confirm that for me, at least, the propensity to be swept up in the sort of intense aesthetic pleasure and fascination that crosses over into the transpersonal realm—into moments of transcendent or *satori*-like bliss—is indeed intimately connected with the tendency of my perceptual and cognitive processes to “dwell in the shaping” (Manning, 2013, p. 177). The fact that due to my autistic mode of perception I live not in a stable and perceptually integrated reality “pre-chunked” into discrete objects and subjects (Manning, 2013, p. 219), but rather in a morphable reality of fractally complex dynamic constellations that are forever shifting and forever in the process of emerging into coherence from the chaos of the informational field or fading back into incoherence as new dynamic

constellations emerge to supplant them—in other words, the fact that I directly experience reality as being in a continual state of emergence—seems somehow to give me what I can best describe as an “aesthetic affinity” for the phenomenon of emergence (Corning, 2002; Pearce, 2015) in its various manifestations in the world around me.

(A note that I feel I ought to include at this point: I hope the reader will pardon the ungainly convolutions of my efforts at explaining the subjective experience of autistic perception and how it compares with non-autistic perception. In attempting such explanations, I face a twofold challenge. First, I am writing in a language that was never intended to describe autistic perception—a language that, like all written and spoken languages I know of that have evolved in human societies, was largely developed by and for non-autistic people who had no direct experience of autistic perception and thus possessed neither the knowledge nor the motivation to develop language that could readily encompass such experience. And second, I myself have had no direct experience of non-autistic perception, and can only base my comparison on what I’ve inferred from a lifetime of hearing and reading non-autistic people’s abundant accounts of non-autistic experience. The struggle with this twofold difficulty is inherent to the task of writing autistic autoethnography. Non-autistic authors writing about autistic experience are spared this struggle, as they have the luxury of simply remaining oblivious to any aspects or nuances of autistic experience that fall outside the scope of what they can readily articulate or imagine.)

So, what do I mean when I say that one feature of autistic consciousness is an aesthetic affinity for the phenomenon of emergence? First of all, my general impression is that the graceful emergence of complex order from seeming chaos is a phenomenon that tends to be both compelling and aesthetically pleasing to a great many people, non-autistic as well as autistic. Instances of this phenomenon in nature, such as the formation of ocean waves, or murmurations—the spectacular flight formations of large groups of starlings—tend to be widely appreciated as fascinating and beautiful. In literature (and notably in the medium of the television series, these days), many people take pleasure in the emergence of complex and intricate storylines from the confluence of multiple plot threads. Equivalent aesthetics of emergence are found in other art forms such as music. Much of science, mathematics, and scholarship, too, involves the pursuit of emergent pattern and coherence in some or other field of information; often it seems that those who most excel in any given field of knowledge and research are those who perceive a compelling beauty in the traces of some particular emergent coherence or understanding and are moved to passionately pursue its further emergence.

While this affinity for the aesthetics of emergence can clearly be found in varying degrees in vast numbers of non-autistic humans, accounts of autistic experience convey a strong impression that it is a quality that is especially pronounced and prevalent within the autistic population (e.g., Baggs, 2010; Biklen, 2005; Bogdashina, 2010, 2013; J. Jones & Yontz, 2015; Mukhopadhyay, 2003, 2008; Prahlad, 2017; Prince-Hughes, 2013; Sequenzia, 2015a, 2015b;

Tammet, 2007, 2009; D. Williams, 1998, 1999). So much so, in fact, that rather than conceptualize it as a relatively common human trait that's especially pronounced in autistics, one might perhaps just as accurately and usefully conceptualize this aesthetic affinity as an essentially autistic trait that also manifests to some degree in the non-autistic population. I suspect this may be what Hans Asperger was getting at when he famously remarked, "It seems that for success in science and art a dash of autism is essential" (as quoted in Anderson, 2013, p. 109).

Another relatively common autistic trait, also a product of the tendency of autistic perception to "dwell in the shaping" (Manning, 2013, p. 177), is a rich synesthesia in which sensory and aesthetic stimuli not only bleed and reverberate across multiple sensory channels but are also experienced deeply within the body, resonating throughout the embodied self on multiple levels including the kinesthetic and the emotional, sometimes creating a sense of merging in which the boundaries between the experience of the external stimulus and the experience of the embodied self become blurred or permeable or temporarily nonexistent. In some autistics, myself included, such experiences can cross at times into the realms of the transpersonal, the realms of ecstatic and the transcendent (e.g., Bogdashina, 2010, 2013, 2016; Manning, 2013; Mukhopadhyay, 2003, 2008, 2015; Prahlad, 2017; Prince-Hughes, 2013; Savarese, 2010; 2018; Sequenzia, 2015a, 2015b; Tammet, 2007, 2009; Walker, 2015a, 2018; D. Williams, 1998, 1999). In one early and representative account of this phenomenon, for instance, Donna Williams (1998) wrote that she "would resonate with the sensory nature of

the object with such an absolute purity and loss of self that it was like an overwhelming passion into which you merge and become part of beauty itself” (p. 15).

When a person possesses this capacity to experience certain aesthetic phenomena at a level of synesthetic richness and felt bodily resonance that crosses over into the transcendent or sublime, and when the same person also possesses the autistic affinity for the aesthetics of emergence, plainly there exists the potential for those two capacities to act in combination. The result is a propensity for being moved to ecstatic states of sublime joy by encounters with the phenomenon of emergence. This propensity is by no means universal among autistics, of course, given that there’s considerable neurocognitive diversity within the autistic population (Savarese, 2018; Silberman, 2015).

Questions as to precisely how common it is for autistic people to be prone to such experiences of transcendent joy, and the frequency with which such experiences are associated with the aesthetic experience of emergence, fall outside the scope of this inquiry. To address such questions properly, one would not only have to survey a great many autistics, one would also have to engage with other quite complex questions and possibilities—for instance, the possibility that the capacity for finding sublime joy and ecstasy in emergence is actually an innate capacity for most or all autistics, but that many autistics never get to experience the realization of that capacity because it’s locked away behind the layers of deep chronic tension they’ve built up in response to social pressures and social trauma (these chronic tensions, and their causes and unintended

consequences, are discussed at length in Chapter 5. One of my goals in undertaking this present inquiry is to inspire future research on such questions.

For now, I can simply state that the strong propensity to be moved to states of transcendent joy by encounters with the phenomenon of emergence is very much a part of my own personal autistic experience, and throughout my life has played a significant role in my creative and spiritual life. And I can state also that in recent years, as I've discussed and written about this aspect of my experience on various occasions, numerous other autistics have responded with enthusiastic confirmations that it's part of their experience as well—and have also told me that it's a part of their experience they've rarely talked about because it's so difficult to explain coherently, which makes me feel a bit better about the awkward tangles of my own attempts to articulate it (this present effort included). Several years ago, in my very first clumsy effort at autoethnography to be published in print, I described the phenomenon this way:

What does tend to occupy my consciousness are the dynamics of systems, the ways form and flow dance together in space and time. The emergence of harmony and synchronicity from apparent chaos compels my full attention. To this day, for instance, I find myself overcome with joy whenever I witness one of those sublime moments of beauty in which a flock of forty or fifty birds that have been randomly pecking about on the ground suddenly all take wing at once, arranging themselves into a perfect V-shaped flight pattern within seconds. (Walker, 2012a, p. 94)

So there I was in my very first aikido class, watching Roni Sensei and Dave Sensei demonstrate *gyakute tori irimi nage*. And what I saw was pure beauty—the beauty of emergence, of the chaos of human bodies in conflict elegantly resolving into sublime moments of harmony and grace. Three decades later, in the same piece quoted above, I wrote:

I fell in love with aikido immediately. Human bodies had always seemed rather ungainly, but here I saw bodies flow in elegant dances, organizing into one graceful configuration of lines and curves after another, spontaneously coming into sync with one another, moving together to describe exquisite spirals. As I mentioned earlier, I've always been enthralled by those moments of grace when harmonious organization suddenly emerges from apparent chaos. It was clear to me at once that aikido was an art that was designed to *create* such moments. That was all it took to hook me. (Walker, 2012a, p. 100)

Not only was aikido an art designed to create those sublime moments of emergent grace that I so loved, aikido also enabled one to fully participate in those moments of grace with one's own body—to experience the emergence of harmony as an embodied process. As George Leonard Sensei (2001) has described it:

The art of aikido may achieve a transcendent beauty.... Whirling, dancing, throwing, the *nage* seems to travel along unfamiliar lines of space-time.... He moves easily in the midst of ferocious blows and flying tackles, not by opposing but by joining. He deals with the strongest attack by embracing it, drawing it into a circle of concord which, he feels, somehow joins him with the essential unity and harmony of the universe.... He is always *here*, it is always *now*, and there is only harmony, harmony. (p. 48)

Just witnessing this for the first time, just this brief glimpse of it in that demonstration in my first class, filled my tense and traumatized little 12-year-old bodymind with light, with a joyful, radiant sense of possibility. I could see and feel and taste the bright, humming, spacious arcs and spirals of the *waza* as it unfolded in front of me and seemed at the same time to unfold inside of me. And that was just from watching it. I knew right then that I'd keep coming back, that I'd put in whatever amount of sweat and hard work it might take to get me to the point where I could experience what it was like to actually embody those moments of grace with my own flesh and bone. My attunement—and irresistible

attraction—to the aesthetics of emergence and to such moments of emergent grace has served as a guiding light in my aikido practice ever since.

Dyspraxia and Dissociation, Persistence and Plasticity

While my autistic preference for explicitly spelled-out rules and rituals of conduct helped me to feel at home in the dojo environment, and while my autistic perceptual style gave me a profound capacity to apprehend and appreciate the beauty of aikido right from the start, there was another fundamental autistic trait that created considerable challenges for me throughout the early years of my training: dyspraxia, the pervasive developmental impairment of physical motor control and coordination that is a core feature of autism (Anzulewicz et al., 2016; Dziuk et al., 2007; Leary & Donnellan, 2012; Torres & Denisova, 2016; Torres & Whyatt, 2018; Walker, 2018).

In my earlier discussion of dyspraxia in Chapter 2, I note that in addition to the neurobiological mechanisms underlying autistic dyspraxia, the dyspraxic motor impairments of autistics are greatly exacerbated by the chaotic nature of autistic sensory experience, insofar as sensory chaos makes it exceptionally challenging for an autistic person to tune into and process the flow of kinesthetic and proprioceptive sensory information that provides much of the basis for bodily awareness and for the moment-to-moment monitoring and adjustment of one's own physical movements (Bogdashina, 2016; Leary & Donnellan, 2012; Roley et al., 2001; Walker, 2018).

Sadly, the already significant innate difficulties posed for autistics by the combination of dyspraxia and sensory chaos are further compounded, quite

needlessly, by the ways in which most autistics in the modern industrial world are raised, educated, and socialized. To begin with, the extensive traumatic abuse and bullying inflicted on most autistic children promotes a state of chronic dissociation, a common trauma symptom in which a person's awareness becomes disconnected from their moment-to-moment bodily experience (Eckberg, 2000; Grand, 2015b; Ogden, Minton, & Pain, 2006; Van der Kolk, 2014; Walker, 2018). Constant pressure to conform to non-autistic developmental norms, as well as the relentless regimen of “therapies” and “treatments” to which many autistic children are subjected, can also produce or contribute to a state of perpetual overwhelm that fosters dissociation (Asasumasu, 2013a, 2013b; Bascom, 2012; Dawson, 2004; S. R. Jones, 2016; Kupferstein, 2018; Walker, 2018). This dissociation becomes a further impediment to bodily awareness, resulting in further impairment of motor skills—which in turn tends to lead to further abuse, bullying, and social rejection, and thus to further trauma and dissociation.

On top of the above factors, the pressure to suppress stimming and other natural autistic bodily needs and mannerisms, the chronic physical tension necessary to effect such suppression and to armor the child against the onslaughts of a perpetually overwhelming and often hostile world, and the tendency of non-autistic adults to treat autism and its embodied expression as an undesirable pathology rather than as integral to the child's selfhood, all serve to engender in the autistic child a sense of alienation from the child's own natural physicality, vitality, and embodied selfhood—a sense of the body as other rather than self, and as a site of failure, shame, and discomfort. All of these factors, too, foster

dissociation, and thus contribute to the self-perpetuating downward spiral in which physical aptitude becomes increasingly impaired (Walker, 2018).

And finally, because the combination of sensory confusion and dyspraxia tends to make autistics significantly slower than non-autistics when it comes to acquiring competence at new physical skills, the competition-obsessed culture that dominates modern society shames young autistics for their lack of physical aptitude and teaches them that they have no place in the worlds of athletics, dance, or other such physically oriented pursuits (Wainscot, Naylor, Sutcliffe, Tantom, & Williams, 2008; Walker, 2018). This state of affairs is especially sad because these are precisely the sort of activities which, if presented in a supportive and accessible way, could help young autistics to develop much-needed bodily awareness, coordination, and sense of joyful physicality. Writing off young autistics as having no potential for physical prowess becomes a message they internalize, and thus a self-fulfilling prophecy (Walker, 2018).

All of this was certainly the case for me. At the time I began my aikido training, the combination of dyspraxia all the various factors noted above made me about as unpromising a novice aikido student as one could ever hope to find. The chaos of my sensory experience, compounded by trauma-induced dissociation and alienation from my own physicality, interfered not only with my ability to keep track of my own body, but also my ability to process the instructions and demonstrations provided by the teachers. And even when I could sort of partly manage to figure out where all my limbs were and what I was

supposed to do with them, my dyspraxia meant that often my body still wouldn't do what I intended.

In a transformative practice like aikido, however, what ultimately matters most is persistence. Nothing in aikido came easy for me, but I hadn't expected it to. In the dozen years I'd been alive before I started my aikido training, nothing had ever been easy for me. Aikido was beautiful, and one thing at which we autistics famously excel is sustained and intensive focus on those phenomena, topics, and activities—whatever they may be and however odd they may seem to others—in which we find an inexplicable beauty. Who knows what peculiar dynamics of neurology, heart, and spirit cause some autistics to perceive a compelling and transcendent beauty in plumbing fixtures or railroad trains, while others find similar beauty in urban architecture or baseball statistics, in Disney animation or higher mathematics, in the sensory experience of running water or the music of Bach? We find beauty where we find it.

Aikido did end up helping me to achieve my original objective of getting better at fighting; by the time I was 16 there wasn't a bully in town who wanted to tangle with me. But by that time I'd nearly forgotten that that was why I'd started training. I was in it for the beauty, and I still am. I knew from my very first aikido class that to be able to participate in the beauty I saw in the art, I'd work as long and hard as I had to. So I persisted, and with persistence came transformation (Walker, 2012a, 2018).

With persistence, human bodyminds learn. Autistic bodyminds may function differently from non-autistic brains in some significant ways, but

neuroplasticity—the brain’s wondrous capacity to continually modify itself in response to experience—appears to be a universal human trait (Cassilhas, Tufik, & Túlio de Mello, 2016; Costandi, 2016; Debaere, Wenderoth, Sunaert, Van Hecke, & Swinnen, 2004; Doidge, 2007; Ganguly & Poo, 2013; Roley et al., 2001). Over time, like the waters of a river slowly carving a path through solid rock, dedicated practice built new pathways in my brain, new capacities for mindful embodiment that countered and gradually came to supplant the dyspraxia, the disorientation of sensory and cognitive overload, and the dissociative effects of trauma (Walker, 2018).

***Ki* Tests as Somatic Awareness Training**

In aikido, I discovered almost immediately, training in the use of the body went far beyond the expected “this is what to do with your feet and hands in a fight” sort of instruction. Integral to the practice was a rigorously mindful approach to the most fundamental aspects of embodiment: how one sat, stood, walked, breathed, found one’s balance, focused one’s gaze, carried one’s shoulders, gripped with one’s hands, engaged the body in any physical action.

This mindful embodiment was taught in the aikido dojo primarily through nonverbal feedback in the form of direct physical pressure. In many aikido classes, for instance, we would do exercises referred to as “*ki* tests,” in which we would kneel or stand or move, attempting to simultaneously maintain stability and keep our breathing and our muscles relaxed, while instructors or fellow students pushed on us from various angles with gradually increasing force. The instructors might test our stability in this way at any time, pushing on us just as we finished a

pivoting move or returned to upright after rolling over our shoulders. We would extend our arms and try to keep them straight yet free of excess muscular tension, while fellow students tried to bend them. Our training partners would tightly grab us and try to hold us in place while we tried to move and take their balance without straining. From practices like these we learned over time to stay calm, stable, poised, and centered under pressure; to cultivate full-body awareness and a sense of connection to the ground and the space around us; to notice and release excess tensions as they arose; to develop well-aligned postures and harmonious ways of moving that deployed the body's power with fluid ease (Walker, 2018).

This *ki* testing approach to teaching somatic awareness through physical pressure worked for me where no previous attempt to teach me any sort of body awareness or physical aptitude had worked. Prior attempts by various adults to use verbal instruction and visual demonstration to get me to stand with better posture, or to perform some feat of coordination like kicking a ball, had failed for the simple reason that between the dissociation and the difficulty processing kinesthetic and proprioceptive sensory input, I couldn't tell what I was doing. How could I change the way I held my spine or moved my feet, when I couldn't even find my spine or my feet? Intrusive physical interventions, like when teachers at school would grab me and force my body into some semblance of the posture they wanted me to hold, hadn't worked either—as soon as hands were no longer touching me, I would again lose track of myself and within seconds I'd shrink back into my habitual hunched and twisted pose without even noticing.

But the physical pressures and resistances that were continually provided in aikido training worked for me. Instead of trying to impose changes on my body from the outside, these pressures gave me the physical feedback I needed to adjust and refine my own embodiment from within. The sustained pressure of a push helped me to feel my body, to locate myself, and provided moment-to-moment information on the efficacy of each adjustment I made.

For instance, in one of the most basic and frequently practiced exercises, an aikidoka would sit in the traditional Japanese kneeling position called *seiza* while an instructor or fellow student pushed steadily on the front of their shoulder. Practicing this exercise, I learned that the push would cause me to tip over unless I maintained a well-aligned upright posture, dropped excess muscular tension without going limp, and grounded myself through focus on the *hara*, the energetic center in the lower abdomen (Leonard, 1999, 2001; Murphy, 1992). If the quality of my posture lapsed, or if I tensed my shoulders, I knew it instantly because I'd start to tip over. If I allowed my breath to become shallow, tight, or uneven, muscular tensions would start to arise, and I'd tip over. If I hunched forward and strained against the push, even slightly, I'd tip over. If I began to go limp or to dissociate, I'd tip over. The only way to keep from tipping over was to remain impeccably mindful in my embodiment.

This was the most clear and direct sort of feedback one could hope for. And unlike the constant tedious criticism and “correction” to which I'd been subjected throughout my life, the feedback provided by *ki* tests wasn't about attempts to impose someone else's concepts of normativity on me. Instead, it was

about providing opportunities for me to experiment and find out for myself, on a concrete, visceral, bodily level, what worked for me and what didn't.

These *ki* tests and similar practices of mindful embodiment under pressure were invaluable to me in overcoming dyspraxia. Through regular diligent engagement in such practices I got gradually better at staying tuned into my physicality, gradually better at noticing incipient tensions or other lapses in the quality of my embodied presence and correcting them before I started to tip over. And over time I gradually gained the ability to locate myself, to stay grounded, centered, relaxed, and well-aligned in my postures and movements, without any external push or pressure to help orient me (Walker, 2018).

Extending *Ki*

Autistic infants and children struggling to be less overwhelmed by the intensity of their sensory experience instinctively seek to shut out the blooming, buzzing confusion as best they can. On a bodily level, this often manifests as a curling-up, a pulling-inward, a shrinking-away from any sensation or contact that's intrusive or overstimulating. For as long as the existence of autism has been recognized, these perfectly natural responses to sensory overload have been misinterpreted by non-autistics as indicative of a state of withdrawal from reality (Silberman, 2015). As noted in Chapter 2, such misinterpretations—and the pervasive stereotypes about autism that they've produced—represent profound deficits in non-autistic empathy for autistic experience. If a non-autistic person were seated too near the speakers at a concert, and covered their ears because of

the painful volume levels, it's unlikely that anyone would accuse them of withdrawing from reality.

While autism isn't actually a state of withdrawal from reality (Biklen, 2005; Bogdashina, 2010; Manning, 2013; Walker, 2015b, 2018), many autistics, in defensive bodily reaction against daily experiences of sensory overwhelm or social hostility, do in fact develop a style of chronically defensive embodiment that can convey a strong impression of withdrawing. As autistic infants and children grow up, the instinctive bodily reactions of shrinking away from overwhelming stimuli tend to become habitual and unconsciously ingrained as character armor, resulting in an embodiment that's chronically pulled-inward in a sort of perpetual state of energetic retreat (Walker, 2018).

This tendency toward embodying a defensive pulling inward is exacerbated by the pervasive abuse and bullying to which the majority of autistics are subjected. A vicious cycle often occurs in which the tense and pulled-inward embodiment of an autistic child conveys an impression of weakness and fearfulness which marks them as a target for bullying and abuse, and then the bullying and abuse causes the child to become even more tense and defensively pulled-inward in their embodiment, which further perpetuates the cycle.

This is precisely what happened to me in my own childhood, and by the time I reached the age of 12 my embodiment was as intensely pulled-inward as any I've ever encountered—hunched and curled in upon myself, emaciated torso collapsed and concave, eyes downcast, voice a nearly inaudible mumble. I see similar and painfully familiar states of pulled-inward embodiment, in varying

degrees of extremity, in many fellow autistics I encounter—some of them heartbreakingly young, as I was myself. Sadly, such patterns of armoring and traumatized embodiment tend to persist not only through childhood and adolescence but into adulthood and throughout the lifespan, unless intentionally undone and transformed through some form of somatic work (Grand, 1998, 2015b; Kepner, 2001; Ogden et al., 2006; Reich, 1933/1972; Van der Kolk, 2014).

Fortunately for me, aikido was a form of somatic work perfectly suited to undo the pulled-inward shape of my traumatized embodiment. The style of embodiment cultivated in aikido has a distinctly expansive quality to it, and this expansive mode of embodiment is very much the opposite of pulling one’s energy inward or tensing against the world (Crum, 1987; Heckler, 1984; Leonard, 2001; Walker, 2018). The dual self/other attention that’s integral to aikido (discussed further in the next section) is attained in part through the practice of maintaining a centered and grounded state while expanding one’s sphere of attention and sense of presence outward to include the space around one. This sort of expansiveness isn’t about puffing oneself up in a macho, blustering, swaggering sort of way. Rather, it involves a softening outward, a radiant receptivity, an opening to connection with the surrounding space and anyone in it (Leonard, 1999, 2001; Walker, 2018). In aikido, this radiant energetic expansiveness is often referred to as “extending *ki*” (Leonard, 1999, 2001; Saotome, 1993).

My first direct experience of this phenomenon of extending *ki* occurred during the second aikido class I attended, one week after my first class.

Somewhere in the middle of this second class, Dave Sensei introduced my fellow novice aikidoka and me to the basic aikido exercise sometimes referred to as “unbendable arm.” To demonstrate the exercise, Dave Sensei called the largest and most muscular student up to join him in front of the class. Dave Sensei stood and extended one of his arms so that it was parallel to the ground with the hand at about shoulder height. He invited the student to bend his arm at the elbow, while Dave Sensei tried to prevent his arm from being bent. Dave Sensei was about five foot eight and had a fairly slight build, while the student was somewhere over six feet tall. The student grasped Dave Sensei’s wrist with one hand and placed his other hand on Dave Sensei’s bicep near the elbow joint, a position that enabled him to apply his power quite effectively. Unsurprisingly, he was able to bend Dave Sensei’s arm with relative ease in a matter of seconds, despite Dave Sensei straining to prevent it. Dave Sensei then stuck out his arm once again, and invited the burly student to bend his elbow a second time. The student tried again, in exactly the same way he’d done it the first time. But this time, Dave Sensei’s arm didn’t bend an inch. A look of surprise came over the student’s face, and he leaned into his task and exerted more pressure. The arm still didn’t budge. Dave Sensei, though, didn’t seem to be straining at all this time around; his hand—the hand of the arm the student was trying so hard to bend—was so relaxed that he was able to wiggle his fingers.

The student kept on trying to bend that arm. He tried so hard that he broke out in a sweat and his face turned red, but he might as well have been trying to bend a steel bar. Meanwhile, apparently paying little heed to the big guy trying to

bend his arm, Dave Sensei was chatting away to the rest of us students in an even, relaxed voice about how to do what he was doing. According to Dave Sensei, the trick was to keep one's muscles and breathing soft and relaxed, to stay centered and grounded using the methods we'd been taught in the previous week's class (as described in the previous section, "*Ki Tests as Somatic Awareness Training*"), and to imagine *ki* as some sort of light or force or energy extending from our centers, through our arms, out through our fingertips, and out into the distance, like water shooting out through a fire hose.

Imagine? That was something I knew how to do. As usual, after the demonstration, all the students in the class paired off to practice the exercise in dyads. And, here, for once, was an exercise I could do well on the first try. In fact, unlike any other aikido exercise we'd been taught so far or any other physical activity I'd tried to learn in my life, I was actually able to get the hang of this one a bit faster than most of my non-autistic peers.

Thinking about it now, this makes perfect sense in light of what I've learned in the intervening years about how my autistic style of sensory experience differs from neurotypical sensory experience. Dave Sensei's instructions involved using what one might call the *sensory imagination*: the imagining of sensory experiences, such as the visual experience of light moving in and around and through me or the felt bodily experience of some imagined energetic force moving like rushing water. For the majority of people, vivid experience of those types of sensory phenomena are a relative rarity, generally confined to the sort of temporary altered states of consciousness accessed through the use of psychedelic

compounds or through intensive engagement in certain forms of yoga, meditation, or similar transformative practices (Murphy, 1992; Tart, 1990). For me, however, such experiences have always been a constant part of my everyday life. The vivid bodily sensation of water rushing through me was something I already experienced every time I saw or heard actual running water. Every bodily sensation has its own unique combination of luminosity and color, and every sound or smell or taste triggers its own combination of luminosity and color and its own felt bodily sensations. For me, this is normal; this is the everyday experience of life. So to imagine *ki* as light or water shooting from my center out through my arm and hand was a simple and natural thing for me. Further, the act of visualization instantly evoked corresponding bodily sensations for me, while the act of imagining a felt bodily sensation instantly evoked a corresponding visual lightshow; in other words, any effort on my part to imagine the flow of *ki* in any one sensory channel was instantly amplified through the alchemy of autistic synesthesia into a multisensory experience that was rich and vivid enough that it was easy to stay focused on and thus to amplify even further.

While metaphysical questions regarding the nature of *ki* fall outside the scope of this dissertation, I do want to note here that I'm personally disinclined to regard *ki* as some sort of supernatural energy akin to the Force in *Star Wars*. I incline more toward thinking of it as our natural vitality. The secret behind feats like unbendable arm, I think, is that we all have a great deal more potential power and vitality than most of us ever learn to access and bring into full embodied expression. Defensive bodily tensions interfere with the flow of that vitality; the

conditions of muscular tension most people commonly associate with strength actually limit the capacity to fully embody the potential for fluid, vibrant power, while relaxing and releasing tensions keeps them from blocking the flow of that vital power (Grand, 1978; Heckler, 1984; Leonard, 2001; Reich, 1933/1972). Obviously, however, more than just relaxation is involved in unbendable arm or the numerous other manifestations of fluid power found in aikido and other martial arts and vigorous somatic practices. The process of relaxing and releasing tensions is perhaps akin to untangling knots in a hose; it removes the obstructions to the flow, but increasing the power of the flow by turning up the water pressure and aiming the nozzle of the hose is a different matter. Based on my experiences in aikido and other somatic practices, starting with that very first lesson in unbendable arm, I'd say that the use of sensory imagination is one of the more effective ways to access and direct the flow of ki. Unbendable arm is what I immediately thought of the first time I encountered Gaston Bachelard's (1943/2002) compelling observation that "Anyone who can imagine can will" (p. 111).

In any event, there I was in the second aikido class I ever attended, taking slow deep breaths to stay relaxed while I imagined bright vibrant energy pouring through my scrawny little 12-year-old arm and out my fingertips. And my partner, a full-grown man nearly a foot taller than me and twice my weight, sweated and grunted and strained and was completely unable to bend my arm. Needless to say, I was thrilled. Here was an aikido exercise that I could perform successfully on

the first try, not to mention an extraordinary and seemingly magical experience of a kind of strength that was entirely unprecedented in my experience.

Dave Sensei's instructions on performing the unbendable arm exercise, which I'd followed with such exciting success, had involved a sharply focused approach to *ki* extension: one imagined "aiming" *ki* straight out one's arm, toward some distant point, as if one were projecting a laser beam with one's mind. While the unbendable arm exercise could be performed in this way, many subsequent lessons in *ki* extension involved less of a laser-like focus and more of the radiant expansiveness I described earlier. This expansiveness involved a different sort of *ki* extension, a sense of a sphere of *ki* shining outward in all directions, a soft radiance more compatible with a state of receptivity and connection.

Unbendable arm was a useful and compelling introduction to the experience of *ki* extension, to be sure. Having thus grasped the concept of extending *ki*, however, it was in progressing from the initial laser focus to the softer radiant expansiveness that the practice of *ki* extension became truly invaluable and deeply transformative. That quality of expansiveness was essential to finding and maintaining the heightened states of attentive connection with others and awareness of one's surroundings that was fundamental to the grace of aikido—and was also the key to countering and undoing my defensively pulled-inward embodiment.

Throughout the early years of my aikido training, I diligently practiced and cultivated this quality of expansiveness. I would go through my daily life continually imagining the field of my presence blossoming outward. This practice

gradually reshaped my embodiment, opening up my breathing and posture and dissolving long-held tensions, until my habit of defensively pulling inward was a thing of the past. I didn't need to shrink from the world or tense against it anymore; it turned out the world was far less overwhelming when I could greet it with centered expansiveness (Walker, 2018).

This is one of the key lessons (or *ki* lessons) of aikido: tight contraction of the muscles feels like strength, defensive pulling-inward and the armor of muscular tension feels like protection, but these are illusions. Relaxed expansiveness improves attunement to others and the surrounding space, provides greater ability to access fluid power and to make calm spontaneous responses to emergent situations, increases physical and psychological resilience, and projects an impression of easy confidence that smooths human interactions and decreases chances of becoming a target (Crum, 1987; Heckler, 1984; Leonard, 2001). Tension and contraction inhibit all of the aforementioned capacities (Heckler, 1984). I learned all of this over and over again in the aikido dojo, and by experimenting with applying (or forgetting to apply) the lessons of aikido outside of the dojo. I learned most of it experientially before I ever heard any teacher articulate it in words.

I believe that this lesson, this somatic practice of replacing tension and contraction with relaxed and centered expansiveness, is of great potential benefit to anyone, autistic or otherwise—that's certainly what I've observed in many years of teaching it. But it seems to me that it's an especially important lesson and practice for my fellow autistics and anyone else whose early experiences of

overwhelm and trauma have made them particularly prone to pulling inward and contracting defensively against the onslaughts of the world. To embody the quality of relaxed and centered expansiveness, and to actively meet the world with that quality of embodiment, can transform one's experience in such a way that what was once overwhelming or unbearable—including intense sensory experience—can be navigated with far greater ease and even embraced with pleasure.

A final thought to conclude this section on extending *ki*: in writing my description of first learning the unbendable arm exercise and subsequently building on that experience to cultivate the radiant quality of expansiveness, it occurred to me that in my case this process constituted an inadvertent yet perfect example of what's known as *strengths-based learning*, an approach that's sometimes particularly recommended for educating neurodivergent students (Armstrong, 2012).

My extensive childhood history of overwhelm and trauma, and the resulting extreme pulled-inwardness of my embodiment, could have made it especially difficult for me to learn to embody radiant expansiveness. But the sensory imagination and more intent laser-like focus involved in unbendable arm were natural areas of strength for me, as they are for many autistics (Armstrong, 2012; Bogdashina, 2010, 2016; Prahlad, 2017; Silberman, 2015; Tammet, 2009). So I was able to get the hang of unbendable arm with ease, which gave me an initial embodied experience of what it meant to extend *ki* and how the sensory imagination could be used to access the quality of extension—an experience that

then served as a foundation for experiments with other variations of *ki* extension, like that quality of radiant expansiveness, which might otherwise have been more elusive for me. Start from the strengths, from what comes naturally, and build inroads from there into more alien territory (Armstrong, 2012). It worked for me, and my instructors and I didn't even know at the time that that's what we were doing—I'd certainly never heard of any concept like strengths-based learning back in those days.

Mindful Embodiment and Dual Attention

In aikido, one practices dealing gracefully with physical attacks by working in harmony with the attacker's movement and power, redirecting the force of their attack in order to take their balance. In order to do this well, one must remain mindful in one's own embodiment: centered and grounded so as not to be overwhelmed by the attack, well-aligned in order to make efficient use of one's own power, and relaxed so that one's tensions don't interfere with the flow of one's movements. At the same time, one must attend deeply to the person who is delivering the attack; the only way to truly work in harmony with them is to remain present and attuned to their embodiment as it shifts from moment to moment (Holiday, 2013; Leonard, 1999, 2001; Walker, 2012a, 2018).

This type of dual attention, in which one stays centered, relaxed, and able to continually regulate one's own embodied state while simultaneously attuning to and interacting mindfully with others, is perhaps the most important, challenging, and transformative capacity that aikido helps its practitioners to develop. A significant part of the value of aikido training lies in the fact that with dedicated

practice one can cultivate this dual attention in every area of one's life, bringing a centered, mindful presence to one's interactions with the world and everyone in it. After all, if one can learn to remain mindfully present while under direct physical attack, one can learn to remain mindfully present for just about anything (Dobson, 1993; Heckler, 1984; Leonard, 1999; Walker, 2012a, 2018)

What I discovered over the first few years of my own aikido training was that the qualities of mindful and centered presence we practiced embodying in aikido also had the power to transform my relationship with my own sensory experience. Once I began to grasp the rudiments of the somatic skill of making subtle moment-to-moment adjustments in my embodiment in order to remain centered while my training partners pushed on me or attacked me, it wasn't too long before I discovered that a similar process of intentionally adjusting my embodiment could be equally helpful to me in navigating those chaotic floods of sensory input by which we autistics so often find ourselves overwhelmed (Walker, 2012a, 2018).

The fundamental nature of my sensory experience didn't change; it remained as intense and chaotic as ever, blooming and buzzing with vibrant synesthesia. But the qualities of mindfully embodied presence and dual attention I was cultivating in my aikido practice enabled me to navigate the blooming, buzzing confusion gracefully, to work in harmony with it without being destabilized or overwhelmed by it, just as I'd learned to meet the power of my aikido training partners with serene stability and to work in harmony with the incoming force of their attacks (Walker, 2012a, 2018).

Through this approach I was gradually able to free myself from the stressful and debilitating experience of daily sensory overload, while still retaining and remaining present with the full vibrant sensory richness of my autistic experience of “the world in its morphability” (Manning, 2013, p. 219) and the many useful, beneficial, and pleasurable qualities of my particular style of autistic cognition. The flood of intense ever-shifting sensory experience was still there, but now, instead of drowning in it, I could surf it.

Asocial Attunement

As noted earlier, the vast majority of autistics in the modern world are traumatized by extensive lifelong histories of abuse, rejection, bullying, and unremitting pressure to suppress their natural selves and conform to impossible demands of normative performance, all generally starting in very early childhood (e.g., Asasumasu, 2013b; S. R. Jones, 2013, 2016; Silberman, 2015; Walker, 2018; Yergeau, 2018). As a result, social anxiety is epidemic within the autistic population, and many autistics tend to find social interaction with non-autistic persons to be draining and stressful because of expectations based on past trauma and because of actual or anticipated/internalized pressures to conform to norms of neurotypical social performance (e.g., Cassidy et al., 2018; Danforth et al., 2018; Endow, 2012; S. R. Jones, 2013).

Training on the mat in an aikido dojo involves constant interpersonal interaction, humans working together and moving together in intimate dances of flow and connection and clash and struggle and harmony. On a number of occasions over the years, when I’ve mentioned the intensely interactive nature of

the art to fellow autistics, they've quite understandably reacted with varying degrees of horror and have expressed bafflement as to why on earth any autistic person would voluntarily engage in such a thing.

Part of the answer lies in how the conventions of formal dojo etiquette serve to mediate interpersonal interactions in a traditional aikido dojo in a way that can function as an organic social equalizer and accommodation, as already discussed in the section entitled “Dojo Etiquette as Organic Social Accommodation.” But there's also the fact that the interactions on the aikido mat, the dances of human bodyminds connecting and moving together in the practice of aikido exercises and *waza*, are to a certain extent asocial in nature. By which I mean that these interactions aren't primarily guided by conventional social expectations and social agendas “such as entertainment, intellectual stimulus, emotional support, ego status ... [or] socially ingrained obligations such as seeking or giving assurance [or] approval ... or acting out courtship behaviors” (Alli, 2003, p. 4)—and thus, compared to most interpersonal interactions, tend to be far less mediated by the sort of culturally established normative social cues that are notoriously difficult for autistics to read and emulate.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the persistent difficulty with social cues that is one of the more well-known hallmarks of autism originates in the fact that social cues tend to hold less salience in autistic perception than they do in neurotypical perception (Klin et al., 2003; Manning, 2013; Savarese, 2014). In this sense, autistic perception, like the practice of aikido *waza*, also leans toward the asocial, at least relative to neurotypical perception. The ubiquitous difficulty autistics face

in perceiving and reading social cues ordinarily constitutes a significant social impairment (e.g., Endow, 2012; Klin et al., 2003; Myles et al., 2004), and has certainly been a major issue for me personally (I did eventually get the hang of the whole normative social cues thing pretty well, but it's been a long process that didn't really get properly underway until my training in counseling psychotherapy in my late 30s and early 40s).

In the context of aikido training, however, in the intimate yet asocial dances of aikido *waza*, my autistic tendency toward not instinctively registering social cues not only didn't pose a significant problem, but actually provided some unexpected advantages. It turns out that the instinctive "topology of salience" (Klin et al., 2003, p. 349) that makes social cues tend to stand out in the perceptions of neurotypical persons can constitute a significant distraction from activities like aikido *waza* that involve attunement to other bodyminds on a deep asocial level. Such attunement can be considerably easier to tap into and maintain when one isn't prone to being distracted by the persistent tendency to find social cues more salient and compelling or to have one's attention easily pulled back to the social level. As Melanie Yergeau (2018) has observed, asocial does not have to mean disengaged, noninteractive, or nonrelational: "This [autistic] asociality, while often represented by clinicians as a nonsociality, is inherently relational in that it defies, reclaims, and embraces the expansiveness that countersocialities can potentially embody" (p. 19).

For example, in aikido, as in classical Japanese sword training and various other *budo* traditions, practitioners are trained to cultivate "soft eyes" (Murphy,

1992, p. 452)—a particular technique of “visual relaxation” (p. 452) that facilitates rapid perceptual processing of motion in a “complex field” (p. 452) of activity. Sustaining the practice of soft eyes is inherently incompatible with visually focusing in on social cues, and especially incompatible with the neurotypical habit of visually attuning to facial expressions and eye contact; in fact, aikido’s founder Morihei Ueshiba O-Sensei specifically admonished his students not to attempt to look into an attacker’s eyes while practicing aikido *waza* (Ueshiba, 1985, p. 27).

On top of this, the vast majority of aikido *waza* involve turning one’s body such that one isn’t directly facing one’s *uke*; sometimes one must rapidly pivot 180 degrees to go from directly facing an attacking *uke* to being side-by-side and facing in the same direction as the *uke*. Generally, in performing aikido *waza*, any time one is directly face-to-face with one’s *uke* after one has avoided the brunt of *uke*’s initial attack, one is placing oneself in a position in which one is most likely vulnerable to further attack, and in which it is more or less impossible to successfully complete a throw or pin. Even if one’s body is in a good position relative to one’s *uke*, an attempt to look at *uke*’s face will tend to subtly disrupt one’s bodily alignment in ways that render it impossible to bring the *waza* to a harmonious and successful completion.

Overcoming the inclination to try to continue looking at one’s *uke*, particularly at their face and eyes, thus tends to represent a persistently troublesome challenge for most neurotypical aikidoka in the earliest years of their training; this is a phenomenon I’ve consistently observed throughout my years of

teaching aikido. The fact that I had no inclination to visually zero in on faces, and that I was instinctively disinclined to make eye contact and came to aikido with 12 years of prior experience in actively avoiding eye contact, proved to be a major asset when it came to mastering soft eyes and performing aikido *waza*.

This was just one of the ways in which I found the relatively asocial orientation of autistic perception to be an asset in my aikido practice. The nonsalience of superficial social cues in my subjective perceptual world meant I was less easily distracted than most students of aikido when it came to the subtle and sensitive task of attuning my sensory attention to the less social aspects of my interactions with my training partners, to what was happening with them and between the two of us on a deeper somatic level—for instance, to feeling, through even the relatively minimal physical contact of an partner's hand grabbing my arm or my own hand on their arm, what was happening in the partner's body in terms of balance, power, tensions, leverage, energy, weak points, and openings.

With time and practice, all aikido practitioners who persist in their training eventually develop this sort of interpersonal somatic awareness and tactile sensitivity (Leonard, 1999). But my autistic perceptual style gave me a particular edge in that regard, enabling me to start feeling into this deep somatic level of interaction relatively early in my training, to stay attuned to it without being distracted by the social, and to experience it with a characteristically autistic sensory vividness which helped me to better feel my way into refinements in my harmonious connections with my partners and also added an extra layer of psychedelic sensory and aesthetic richness to my practice. My autistic usage of

gaze and touch, like so many aspects of my autistic embodiment, were already fairly asocial relative to neurotypical norms (as discussed in the section of Chapter 2 entitled “Asociality and Autistic Embodiment”), and thus more readily adapted to the asocial levels of connection and interaction on which aikidoka must learn to engage with their training partners in order to perform the art with any real depth and grace.

Beyond the Social

In the early years of my aikido training, I actually wasn't even aware that phenomena such as my vivid sensory experience and sensory imagination, or my natural proclivity for orienting to asocial levels of interaction, constituted unusual advantages peculiar to my autistic modes of perception, cognition, and embodiment. This was partly because, although I'd figured out by the age of 10 or so that my mind and my subjective experience must somehow be quite different from those of the people around me, it wasn't until many years later—when I was well into my 30s—that I started to gain any clear understanding of the precise nature and scope of the differences.

An even bigger factor in my lack of awareness regarding these perceptual advantages was that in the early years of my training any edge provided by such advantages was so heavily outweighed by the challenges of dyspraxia (discussed earlier in this chapter). If the benefits of my perceptual style put me two steps ahead of the average novice aikido student, dyspraxia put me five steps behind—and when all the addition and subtraction of that particular equation is done, it comes out to me being three steps behind, which is more or less what it felt like

most of the time back then. I may have been understanding certain things about the underlying dynamics and beauty of the art at a relatively advanced level, and I may have been perceiving certain somatic and energetic processes with a relatively advanced sensitivity, but when it came to actually performing the movements of aikido *waza* I was spectacularly inept, far less competent than any of my non-autistic fellow students and improving at a far slower rate. So the idea that I might possess any quality that conferred any sort of advantage on the path toward mastery in aikido would never have occurred to me, and would no doubt have seemed preposterous to me or anyone witnessing my struggles back then; my lack of advantages seemed, on the surface, to be self-evident based on my visible lack of aptitude.

The advantages conferred by my perceptual style began to become apparent in my aikido practice only very gradually, over the course of many years. For the first few years, the most significant way in which my perceptual style constituted an advantage was that it kept aikido so compelling to me on a sensory and aesthetic level that I persisted in my training despite the frequent discouragement I felt at my physical ineptitude and slow learning process. It wasn't until I gained some basic technical competence and started helping to teach aikido to others that I began to notice that non-autistic aikido students had their own struggles which were quite different from mine, and that often their greatest struggles were with precisely the thing that I'd never found to be difficult: sensing and feeling into those layers of somatic and energetic dynamics

beyond the social, without getting distracted by ingrained tendencies to prioritize superficial connection and information on the social level.

Thanks to the wonders of synesthesia, the visual and tactile/kinesthetic realms always bleed into one another and inform and supplement one another in my sensory experience. So my tactile attunement to the somatic and energetic activity within and between human bodies (my own and those of others) also manifested as visual “special effects.” As noted earlier in this chapter, for me every bodily sensation has its own luminosity and color—and that includes the sensations involved in my tactile awareness of the activity of other bodies. Gradually, as I got better at feeling the somatic dynamics of other bodies, I also began to develop the ability to visually register many of those somatic dynamics without having to make direct physical contact. I could look at people and see something of the tensions and power and weaknesses and balance and energetic flow in their bodies—and also feel all of those bodily phenomena without needing to literally touch the bodies in question, since visual information also registers with me synesthetically as tactile and kinesthetic information.

I’m not the first autistic person to discover that the distinctive qualities of the autistic perceptual style can be turned toward to the purpose of learning to read bodies on a deep asocial somatic level. Jonny Seitz (2004), an autistic dancer, mime, and movement coach, has written about his own similar experiences:

I have always seen many things that most people miss. I am unable to retain an image of what a person’s face looks like, but I see clearly how people hold themselves, stand and walk, and especially how they approach

and interact with others. I learned to see people as the children that they once were by looking at their bodies and reading backwards. ...

I chose to lead my life involved in fields of either human expression or the physical mechanics of human movement. I worked as a classical ballet dancer, professional mime, choreographer, and personal trainer. Thirty years of research, hands-on experience and insight led me to develop something of a topographical map of the human psyche written across the human body. ...

As strange as it may seem, I never thought what I discovered was any big deal. In fact, I did not even give it a name or think about sharing it with anyone else until I was well into adulthood. ... Basically I assumed everyone else was able to know these same things about people when they looked at each other. To me, it was as clear as day, written in bold capital letters all over their bodies. (p. xxviii)

This ability to perceive the layers of somatic structuring and activity within human bodies is by no means the exclusive domain of certain autistics like Seitz (2004) and myself. I've found it to be widespread among the more advanced practitioners of somatic psychotherapies, and among particularly skilled and experienced practitioners and teachers of various forms of somatic work or bodywork. Many years after I began my aikido training, when I was a graduate student in the Somatic Psychology program at California Institute of Integral Studies in my late 30s, some of my professors demonstrated that they'd developed this ability to a very high degree.

As far as I've been able to glean from my studies and from speaking personally with a number of them over the years, however, all of these exceptional teachers and practitioners developed their body-reading abilities through many years of extensive study, practice, and long-term mindful observation. What sets my own experience and that of Jonny Seitz (2004) apart is that in our case the initial knack for that sort of somatic observation was more or less an innate product of our autistic perceptual styles, although we did

subsequently cultivate and refine the ability through long study and practice. It was natural for us to register the underlying somatic phenomena in the bodies of others as more salient and more readily perceptible than the social cues upon which non-autistics are innately oriented toward focusing.

I first began to really understand this aspect of my perceptual experience, and its potential advantages in the context of somatic work, during my time as a graduate student in somatic psychology. For my non-autistic peers in my graduate program, it didn't come at all naturally to learn to look beyond the social—to look at a smiling face, for instance, and see beyond the social meaning of the smile (e.g., “I'm friendly” or “I'm happy to see you”) to the layers of character armor underneath (which might hold an entirely different and more truthful message than the smile, for those able to read it). Essentially, in struggling to learn to focus on somatic character structure instead of just social cues, my non-autistic classmates were experiencing the exact reverse of the struggles I'd faced in social situations throughout my life. And while my classmates had to work hard at learning to perceive the layers of somatic character structure and activity, in my case I was simply learning a technical vocabulary and set of theoretical frameworks with which I could finally articulate what by that point I'd already been perceiving with ever-increasing clarity for a quarter of a century.

The dominant discourses on autism tend toward a reductionism in which, relative to neurotypical norms, “autism must either be seen as a deficit or as an advantage” (Yergeau & Huebner, 2017, p. 279). One of the reasons I've chosen autoethnography as a method of inquiry is the capacity of autistic

autoethnographic narratives to illuminate complexities of lived autistic experience that can serve to shift discourse away from such reductionism. Taken as a whole, it's clear that my experiences as an autistic practitioner of aikido don't readily reduce to anything so simplistic as a narrative of deficit or a narrative of advantage. My capacity to see beyond the social and perceive deeper levels of somatic activity, which proved so advantageous in contexts such as my aikido practice or my somatic psychology training—and most especially my work as an aikido teacher, as discussed later in this chapter—was born of the same perceptual qualities, the same tendency to not register social cues as having particular salience, that functioned as a substantial deficit or difficulty in social situations throughout my childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood, and throughout the lives of a great many fellow autistics. Whether and to what degree a given quality or tendency constitutes a difficulty or an advantage—or neither, or both—depends very much on context, and on the availability of opportunities to develop one's potentials in certain directions.

While every human brain is unique (Edelman, 1987, 1992; Edelman & Tononi, 2000), the diversity among autistic brains and minds is particularly extreme (Hahamy, Behrmann, & Malach, 2015). Due perhaps to the exceptional plasticity of autistic neurology, each autistic person's brain ends up developing its own wildly unique neural structures and modes of neurocognitive processing; a notable characteristic of the autistic population is “individualized alterations in ... connectivity organization” (p. 302). While there are certain consistent core autistic traits (as discussed in Chapter 2), individual autistics tend to vary greatly

in terms of their particular sensory and cognitive capacities, proclivities, strengths, weaknesses, quirks, talents, sensitivities, potentials, and so on.

Thus, although the tendencies to not automatically register social cues and to face challenges in reading social cues are apparently both innate and ubiquitous among autistics (Klin et al., 2003; Myles et al., 2004), I really can't say how common it is, within the autistic population, for the subjective non-salience and semi-invisibility of social cues to lead to an enhanced capacity to read bodies on a deeper somatic level, as it did for me and Jonny Seitz (2004). It may be that this is one of those many odd perceptual or cognitive talents that crop up in just a small percentage of autistics. Then again, for all I know, it might be a more widespread potential capacity that just rarely gets talked about, cultivated, or noticed—in part, perhaps, because dominant cultural stereotypes of autistics as deficient in the bodily and empathic realms function as self-fulfilling prophecies, and perhaps also in part because an autistic talent for somatic perception can't be as readily monetized on a large scale as the more well-known and widely stereotyped talent of some autistics for the sort of activities that are useful to the tech industry. “Autism is rarely conceived as a causal of talent, unless that talent can be economically capitalized” (Yergeau & Huebner, 2017, p. 281). Perhaps this dissertation will help to inspire future research into the prevalence of such underexplored autistic potentials and how they might be more consistently recognized and cultivated.

Changes

Through persistent training, I slowly transformed my embodiment—my posture uncurling to become upright and poised, my presence going from dissociated and pulled-inward to centered and expansive, dyspraxia and long-held knots of trauma-induced tension giving way to the gradual emergence of fluid bodily power. And while I was putting myself through the early stages of these transformations in my embodiment, the steady flow of time was putting me through adolescence.

The teen years are a notoriously difficult and painful time for most autistics who grow up in the Global North in the modern era. It's a stage of life in which peer relations, peer group membership, social identity, and the slippery dynamics of status, attraction, courtship, and social acceptance and rejection become central concerns while at the same time becoming far more complex (Coleman, 2011). The vast majority of autistic teens—at an extreme social disadvantage among non-autistic peers, poor at reading and emulating neurotypical social cues, standing out as “weird” due to non-normative styles of embodiment and interaction, often having little or no prior experience of positive social connections, and too often already carrying years' worth of social trauma, anxiety, and damaged confidence from negative childhood experiences—tend to fare very poorly in the complicated and often unkind world of adolescent sociality. Most autistics who attend school with neurotypical peers during their teen years experience not only social rejection and isolation but cruel and relentless bullying, often on a daily basis, frequently leading to depression,

anxiety, severe psychological distress, and long-term trauma (Blake, Lund, Zhou, Kwok, & Benz, 2012; Jackson, 2002; Kim, 2015; Schroeder, Cappadocia, Bebko, Pepler, & Weiss, 2014; Wainscot et al., 2008). Happily, I fared considerably better in my own autistic adolescence, thanks in large part to my aikido training.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, prior to reaching my teens I'd had plenty of experience of social rejection and bullying throughout my childhood. The initial turning point, at which my story began to deviate significantly from the unfortunate trajectory of so many young autistic lives, came a few months before I began my aikido training: my resolution, at the age of 12, to start aggressively fighting back against bullying and against the slings and arrows of a hostile world and a hostile school environment. Following through on this resolution soon led to my being expelled from junior high school and sent to a small school for “emotionally disturbed” and “socially maladjusted” youth. It was just a short while after I started attending that new school that I went to my first aikido class.

The smaller class sizes, the mostly slower-paced environment, and the low expectations and easier work all contributed to making my new school considerably less demanding on a sensory and cognitive level than public junior high school had been. This left more of my attention free to focus on puzzling out and learning to navigate the mysteries of social dynamics. These dynamics, too, were simpler than in public school. There were far fewer fellow students to keep track of. Social norms were more flexible because none of the students were particularly “normal” by mainstream societal standards or they wouldn't have been there in the first place. The student body included quite a diverse cross-

section of teenage misfits, ranging from timidly pulled-inward little autistics to menacing juvenile delinquents whose school attendance was regularly checked up on by their probation officers.

Among the male students (back then, I was presumed to be male by everyone, even myself), the basic social hierarchy was relatively simple: the weak and fragile and easily messed-with were at the bottom, and the tough and cool and dangerous were at the top. In the regular order of things I would have been somewhere near the bottom. That's certainly where I started out. But I was on a mission of self-transformation. I was observing, learning, fighting, experimenting, changing. Most of all, I was practicing aikido and experimenting with the ways in which transforming my embodiment could transform my interactions with others. In time, I discovered that in the eyes of the juvenile delinquents who were the top dogs in the student body, the centered, relaxed, and expansive style of embodied presence that I was learning to cultivate in my aikido training registered as physical confidence—and maintaining an air of apparent physical confidence, in the face of their own swaggering performances of confidence, turned out to be the key to convincing the top dogs that I wasn't someone who could be treated like I was near the bottom. By the beginning of my third year there, I had risen into the upper echelons of that school's microcosmic social hierarchy—a big fish in a small pond, as the expression goes—and was getting the sense that I'd learned everything the place had to teach me.

So, starting at the beginning of that third year, I also put my diligently cultivated qualities of calm and expansive embodiment to good use in the process

of persuading the school psychologists to let me attend my local public high school part-time. That year—my sophomore year—I spent the first half of each school day at my little school for delinquents, and was then bussed to the public high school for the second half of the day. After that year, I was out of delinquent school entirely and spent my junior and senior years as a regular full-time public high school student.

I returned to the public school system a very different person and a very different sort of social presence from the miserable kid with the defensively hunched posture who'd been expelled from junior high school at age 12. My capacity for social engagement was still marked by the same characteristically autistic traits that typically contribute to the social rejection of autistic teens by non-autistic peers: I was still hopeless at reading and emulating neurotypical social cues; I still lacked both experience and intuitive grasp when it came to positive neurotypical-style social relations; my embodiment, way of speaking, knowledge, interests, and styles of interaction and relation were still distinctly out of sync with neurotypical norms in a way that clearly marked me as weird and alien in the eyes of the non-autistic. But now my embodiment incorporated not only autistic asociality and stimminess, and that indefinable autistic air of non-normativity, but also the qualities of centeredness, fluidity, and relaxed expansiveness which I'd acquired through my aikido training—and which I'd learned, thanks to my juvenile delinquent classmates at my other school, how to leverage socially into an aura of physical confidence that said I wasn't someone to mess with. My time at that other school had also provided me with some valuable

experiences of social success, however non-normative (not to mention a good deal of experience and practical knowledge in such areas as fighting and illicit drugs, which came in handy in some high school social situations).

What it all added up to was that while there was no way a misfit like me was ever going to have a place in the upper echelons of any public high school social hierarchy, I also gave off a vibe that said I wasn't going to let myself be treated like I was in the lower echelons. My peers just didn't know what to make of me. And so I ended up an odd social outlier, an exception to most of the unwritten rules of the school's social hierarchies, but not an abused outcast like so many autistic teens. I encountered some social ostracism, but no real bullying—the few kids who tried that didn't try more than once. And I also experienced a good deal of positive social connection; some of the friendships I made have continued to the present day. I was a troubled and alienated kid, an angst-ridden punk with an occasionally volatile temperament and a penchant for reckless and destructive behavior, still carrying a load of childhood trauma and frequently bewildered by the neurotypical world—but all in all I look back on my teen years and teen social experiences with a fondness that I've found to be quite rare among autistics, and the positive aspects of those teenage years can largely be traced to my aikido practice and how my commitment to that practice was enabling me to effect an ongoing transformation of the way in which I embodied myself in the world.

Meanwhile, other changes were happening. When I was 17, right after I started my senior year of high school and right after I passed my brown belt test in

aikido (brown belt being the immediate precursor to black belt), Roni Sensei and Dave Sensei, my first aikido teachers, moved 2,000 miles away. Leadership of their dojo was handed off to four of their most senior students—students who'd started training at the same time as me, but had already (very recently) advanced to black belt rank by virtue of not having been slowed down, as I was, by dyspraxia and dissociation during their first few years of training.

With this change in the dojo leadership, I got to encounter still more of the perplexing dynamics of neurotypical social politics—among adults this time, since everyone else in the dojo who was close to my level of aikido experience at that point was in their 20s or 30s or beyond. I watched ego-driven frictions develop between the newly appointed leaders (one of whom in particular was highly sensitive to not being treated with the same deference as her predecessors) and the other upper-ranked students in the dojo (resentful at having to accept the authority of new instructors they hadn't chosen, who weren't that much more experienced than the rest of us and who, until that point, had simply been fellow students of slightly higher rank). Within a few months of the departure of Dave Sensei and Roni Sensei, everyone who had been in the dojo as long as I had, except for the four new instructors, had also departed.

For me, of course, the endlessly fascinating challenge and beauty of the art held far more salience than the petty ego clashes and social frictions, and continued to compel my attention to a far greater degree—much as the sensory fascinations and solitary creative play that had compelled my attention as a child had tended to reduce any social activity in my vicinity to the level of background

noise. So I kept right on training, as old students left and a new generation of students came in, with the result that I soon found myself the most experienced member of the dojo who wasn't one of the instructors.

My new position as senior student meant that I was now called upon to act as an assistant instructor and sometimes to step in as a substitute teacher and lead classes. My teaching role increased the following year—the year after I graduated high school—when one of the instructors at my dojo was invited to teach the brand-new aikido club at nearby Rutgers University, and brought me in as assistant instructor there. In the Rutgers aikido club we had a large group of energetic young undergraduate college students with no prior aikido experience (I say “young,” but when I first started teaching aikido at Rutgers I was 18 and the students were all my age or a bit older); this called for me to frequently take on more of a coinstructor role than an assistant role, and to quickly develop new levels of teaching skill—which was fine with me, since I'd already decided that teaching aikido was something I was going to do for the rest of my life.

Teaching Autistically

Just like practicing aikido, teaching aikido is one of those endlessly challenging paths where one starts out having a whole lot to learn, and then keeps finding that there's more to be learned no matter how long one has been at it and how far one has come. But whereas in my own aikido practice I'd started out being particularly inept, I actually turned out right from the start to have a bit of a gift for teaching. It also turned out that my primary strengths as an aikido teacher were intimately connected with the distinctively autistic aspects of my experience.

My struggles with dyspraxia in the first years of my training, for instance, had forced me to become highly conscious of every detail of how I moved, and every detail of how to effectively use one's body in aikido practice. Having out of necessity become so conscious of the details and mechanics of bodily usage in aikido training, I found that I was particularly well-qualified to teach these details and mechanics to others, to understand what manner of specific guidance and instruction regarding awareness and mindful usage of the body might be particularly useful to a given student at a given moment. My history with dyspraxia and other challenges in the earliest years of my training had also instilled in me a patient faith in every student's ability to eventually get good at aikido if they persisted in diligently working at it; my attitude toward any student, no matter how inept they initially appeared, was, "If even I could improve through persistence, then I know that you can, too."

My greatest asset as an aikido teacher, however, proved to be an exceptional ability to observe any student performing aikido *waza* and instantly identify specific adjustments they could make to their embodiment or technique in order to produce a dramatic improvement in the power, grace, effectiveness, and harmonious flow of their performance. With time and experience, of course, competent teachers of any movement-oriented practice, from the martial arts to yoga to ballet, tend to develop an eye for such adjustments. When I first started teaching, my own eye for these adjustments tended to be on par with that of more experienced teachers, and since then it's continued to improve with practice so that my ability in this area has consistently remained somewhat advanced relative

to my years of experience. My talent for this aspect of teaching might be understood, then, as a matter of my particular perceptual and cognitive style providing me with a natural aptitude for a type of insight that many non-autistic movement teachers also learn to cultivate.

It's also worth noting that I don't simply have an unusually high aptitude for identifying these useful technical adjustments. I also have a tendency, frequently remarked upon by aikido students I've worked with over the years, to come up with especially subtle and often weirdly oblique adjustments that no other instructor would likely suggest—and these are often the adjustments that have the most surprisingly transformative effect on students' performance and lead to the most striking breakthroughs.

For instance, in a situation in which a student's arm is being grabbed by a training partner and the student is unable to move in a way that takes the partner's balance, most experienced aikido teachers will offer a suggestion such as “Relax and drop your shoulders,” or “Bend your knees more and lower your center.” Sometimes my own suggestions are also along such lines. But sometimes, my advice in this sort of situation might be something considerably less obvious and more peculiar, like, “Relax your jaw as you turn the palm of your hand upward”—and following this strange advice will somehow enable the student to discover exactly the way to move and take a partner's balance with a grace and ease beyond what they'd previously been able to find in their performance of this particular *waza*.

It seems to me that both my strong intuitive aptitude for identifying effective adjustments in the technique and embodiment of my students, and my proclivity for identifying those subtle and strangely oblique adjustments that have surprisingly profound effects, are direct products of the distinctive characteristics of autistic perception and cognition. These aptitudes are perfect examples of how the natural autistic mode of gestalt perception (Bogdashina, 2010, 2016)—of perceptual engagement with the ever-emergent complex processes, “dynamic details” (Manning, 2013, p. 219), and “dynamic constellation[s]” (p. 219) of “the world in its morphability” (p. 219)—can facilitate certain forms of both exceptional perception and discernment, and unconventional outside-the-box insights into systems and processes (Armstrong, 2010; Best et al., 2015; Cowen, 2009; Bogdashina, 2010, 2013, 2016; Manning, 2013, 2016; Manning & Massumi, 2014; Mottron, 2011; Silberman, 2015), as well as “intuitive grasp of complex systems” (Bogdashina, 2013, p. 63). As discussed in the section of this chapter entitled “The Aesthetics of Emergence,” I do indeed experience the dances of human bodyminds in aikido practice as complex systems engaged in processes of emergence—so it seems perfectly natural, based on what is known about the nature of autistic perception and cognition, that I should have this capacity to observe a “dynamic constellation” (Manning, 2013, p. 219) of interacting bodies and intuitively spot the precise details that could best be adjusted to bring the system into greater harmony.

Previous sections of this chapter focus on various ways in which the distinctive qualities and characteristics of the autistic bodymind have played a

significant role in shaping my experience as an aikido practitioner (as well as ways in which the practice of aikido has played a significant role in shaping my experience as an autistic person). Some aspects of autistic neurology, such as dyspraxia, have constituted challenges for me in my aikido practice; other aspects have proven advantageous in certain respects. In my view, however, the way in which my autistic mode of perception enables me to identify particularly effective adjustments to the embodiment and technique of my aikido students stands out from the other aspects of my experience as an autistic aikido practitioner, because it constitutes a way in which my being autistic confers significant benefits not primarily upon me as an individual, but upon the students in my dojo.

As I note back in the opening chapter of this dissertation, not only has there been little research on autistic participation in transformative practices, or on the ways in which such practices might interact with distinctively autistic ways of knowing and being; there has also been little or no consideration of the potential of autistic practitioners, through their distinctively autistic ways of knowing and being, to make novel positive contributions to the practices and communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) in which they participate. Even the rare bit of genuinely constructive and nonpathologizing work on the benefits of including autistic participants in communities of practice (e.g., Smagorinsky, 2016) has tended to focus largely on how such inclusion benefits the autistic participants themselves, rather on the potential benefits to non-autistic community members—thus implicitly relegating autistic participants to the role of recipients of the community’s benevolent accommodation, and denying them the dignity of

true reciprocity or of being the providers of benefits rather than merely the perpetual recipients.

My hope is that in highlighting here how my students and my dojo community derive unique and significant benefits from my autistic style of perception and cognition, I can help to inspire those who embark upon further inquiry into the topic of autistic participation in communities of practice to remember to look not only at how autistic participants in such communities benefit, but also at how they contribute.

CHAPTER 5: PARATHEATRICAL RESEARCH

In this chapter, I examine my participation in the transformative embodiment work of the experimental theatre group ParaTheatrical ReSearch—of which I was a core member for two decades, from the ages of 28 to 47—and the role this work played in my ongoing journey of self-actualization and my progression from the unhappy state of chronic alienation that characterized my young adulthood to the hard-won state of overall psychological wellbeing I now have the good fortune to enjoy in my middle years.

Adrift

Upon graduating high school and turning 18, I found myself adrift in the world with no family support and no financial resources to my name. All was going well in my aikido training and the early stages of my development as an aikido teacher, and on a raw physical level it was good to be able to move through the world with the grace and physical confidence I was continually cultivating through my aikido practice. But in other respects, my life was not going very well at all.

No adult in my life up to that point had made any serious effort to prepare me for adulthood. My high school, located in an Ivy League college town, had been heavily focused on preparing students for college, and not for any sort of immediate employment in some trade or vocation that didn't require a college degree. But I had no money for college, and my academic record was far too much of a mess to inspire any college to give me a scholarship; before my expulsion from junior high school, I'd always been too overwhelmed and

traumatized to do the assigned schoolwork, and the school I'd been sent to after my expulsion was more focused on "behavior management" than academic standards, so I'd come into high school far behind my peers academically and had only just barely managed to catch up enough to graduate at all. I didn't even have any idea how to navigate the college application process; it was one of those things, like neurotypical social cues and so many other baffling processes in the neurotypical world, that everyone else just seemed to magically know about and seemed to expect me to also magically know. I'd made one attempt to seek basic how-to information about the college application process from a high school guidance counselor before I graduated, but the counselor had just chuckled and shaken his head and said, "Kids like you don't go to college."

Local entry-level blue-collar jobs and the local community college were inaccessible to me due to the area's poor public transit; my particular style of sensory processing had made it impossible for me to learn to drive a car safely (I still can't drive). The only option I could come up with for maintaining any sort of stable life with a roof over my head, and continuing to live near my friends and aikido community, was to do more of what I'd already been doing during my summers and my afternoons after school: working at meaningless and dehumanizing dead-end jobs for minimum wage. Having to work at these jobs day after day, at a pace and rhythm dictated by neurotypicals and entirely unsuited to my own natural rhythms and cognitive needs, was unremittingly stressful and debilitating. It was like an even-worse version of my childhood experiences in elementary school: never allowed the time and space to meet my own needs for

integration, too stressed and overwhelmed to do much of the work that was demanded of me, constantly talked down to and criticized. Often my stay at a given job would end with me lashing out at a supervisor, or simply walking out and never returning.

I always seemed to be too drained and strung out to think clearly enough to implement any organized plan of positive change. When I tried to look into how I might find a way to afford some sort of college or trade school or something else that might help me build a better life and find work for which I was better suited, I would quickly become overwhelmed by the details and end up paralyzed by panic attacks. When I tried to write and to make art—activities which had brought me great pleasure in high school—I was no longer able to find the groove of my creativity; instead, I would become overwhelmed with anxiety at the thought that producing writing and art of professional quality, and somehow figuring out how to get people to pay me for it, might be my only ticket out of the soul-crushing life in which I was stuck. I felt clear-headed and alive only when I was in the aikido dojo, or getting high with my friends, or absorbed in some physically engaging sensory pleasure like dancing to loud music.

My aikido practice remained a consistent oasis of positive experience in my life, and kept me from being utterly swallowed up by anger, stress, and depression. I continued to train diligently, earning my black belt at the age of 20. Shortly after that a few friends and I moved to the nearby city of Philadelphia together to see if city life held better opportunities for us. For me, there was the opportunity to immerse myself in a more advanced level of aikido training. The

particular aikido lineage within which I'd done my training up to that point had been founded by Shuji Maruyama Sensei, a onetime apprentice of aikido's founder Morihei Ueshiba O-Sensei. The dojo in which I'd begun my training was one of a growing number of offshoots of the dojo that Maruyama Sensei had established in Philadelphia in the 1960s; the Philadelphia dojo was where his most advanced students still taught and where Maruyama Sensei himself taught on the occasions that he came back from Japan to visit.

Unfortunately, apart from the advanced aikido training—which was stellar—the main opportunities Philadelphia offered me were the opportunity to go from living in poverty in a nice town to living in poverty and squalor in a grimy city, and the opportunity to learn first-hand that an anarchist punk lifestyle of squatting in dilapidated buildings and subsisting through scavenging, under-the-table work, and petty crime wasn't as glamorous as books made it out to be and wasn't psychologically healthy for someone with my characteristically autistic need for external stability and dependable routine. After a year or so, in the middle of a cold winter, a day came when my compadres and I were forcibly evicted from the house in which we were squatting, and I'd had enough.

Philadelphia was no place to be homeless in the winter, so I headed back to New Jersey to crash for a bit on the couch of a friend at Rutgers.

At this point I was almost a decade into my aikido training. I'd continued training through the wild instability of my urban punk adventures in Philadelphia, and I wasn't going to let my commitment to training be derailed by homelessness now. Being in the neighborhood of Rutgers University once again, I returned to

assistant-teaching the Rutgers aikido club. A short time after my return, the instructor I was assisting moved out of state—and suddenly I was Nick Sensei, the instructor in charge. I'd felt since my mid-teens that I had a calling to be a sensei someday, but I hadn't expected the honor to suddenly drop into my lap at a time when the rest of my life was in a state of near-total ruin.

What followed was an interesting period in which I served as sensei of the Rutgers aikido club while being homeless on the Rutgers campus. I lugged around a duffel bag containing clothing and other necessities and my aikido *gi* (practice uniform), and slept in dorm lounges or on a couch in the production offices of *The Medium*, the university's weekly humor newspaper, where an old high school friend of mine was on the staff. I never ran into any trouble with campus security. I was the right age to pass for a college student—and more importantly, despite life's challenges, I had that centered and expansive presence I'd cultivated through a decade of aikido training. The state of one's embodied presence communicates messages to others on an instinctual level, and one of the messages my aikido training had taught me to communicate through my own embodied presence was something along the lines of, "I'm so confident and comfortable with being where I am that obviously I must belong here and know exactly what I'm doing here."

Eventually, with support from friends, I was able to get employed again and afford to share rent on an apartment again—which, apart from now being sensei of the Rutgers aikido club, put me right back in the unhappy sort of life I'd been leading prior to my sojourn in Philadelphia. Still not the life I wanted, so at

the age of 23, in search once again for a better life, I packed up the same old duffel bag I'd lugged around during my months of homelessness, and took off across the country to join a couple of friends who'd migrated to Berkeley, California, where I've lived ever since.

I got to Berkeley and was immediately homeless again, but of course I wasn't going to let that derail my aikido training. The aikido dojos in the Berkeley area weren't part of the same aikido lineage I'd trained in up to that point. This wouldn't have deterred me from training in those dojos—but I was broke, and because they weren't part of the same lineage as the dojos in which I'd trained and taught, they didn't know me and weren't going to let me train for free. So for about nine months, I practiced in a public park and taught anyone who was interested in joining me. During those nine months, I found semistable employment and a semistable housing situation, and started looking for a place to teach aikido that had a roof. I ended up bringing my aikido teaching to the Berkeley Adult School for a few months, and then got hired to teach at the Berkeley YMCA—where I continued to teach for many years, while periodically doing additional teaching in other venues like dance and yoga studios.

I continued to grow and improve as an aikido teacher, and to advance in my own training. I visited other aikido dojos with a variety of styles and lineages to further my learning, and for a few years regularly attended the classes led by George Leonard Sensei, whose writings on aikido are cited at various points in this dissertation. But I lacked the funds and organizational skills to set up a good dojo space of my own, and teaching aikido at the YMCA and the other less-than-

ideal venues available to me paid next to nothing, so I continued to work at a succession of underpaid and unfulfilling jobs. In this way I passed through my mid-20s.

My late 20s arrived and I found myself still mired in the same troubles that had dogged me for a decade. My aikido practice—at which I'd now persisted for over 15 years—kept me physically strong and agile, gave me a well-grounded and expansive presence that tended to make a reasonably positive impression socially, and enabled me to easily navigate sensory environments that would have been overwhelming for many of my fellow autistics or for my childhood self. And yet I was increasingly miserable. The endless soul-crushing drudgery and degradation of eking out a barely subsistence-level living doing meaningless bottom-rung jobs was taking an ever-more-severe toll on me as I got older and watched the precious days and years of my life slip away down the drain. For reasons I couldn't understand, though, I continued to become overwhelmed with confusion and panic if I attempted to follow through on the details of any plan of action that might help me to build toward a better life.

Other issues also became apparent, issues which had always been present but to which I hadn't given as much thought when I was younger, or which I'd wrongly expected would just sort of clear up over time if I persisted in my aikido training. For one thing, even though my aikido training had helped me become centered enough that the world in all its blooming, buzzing sensory chaos couldn't easily rattle me, as it rattled so many autistics, and even though I'd cultivated a style of presence which conveyed to others an impression of easy

confidence, somehow I never did quite feel at home or at ease in the world. In fact, I was coming to realize that despite the level of physical prowess I'd attained, I never even felt truly at ease in my own body, except in serendipitous moments of particular grace and flow on the aikido mat. I was starting to see that being centered enough to calmly endure discomfort was a different thing from being genuinely at ease, and that while I'd come to excel at the former, the latter had always eluded me.

Further, while the physically confident presence and grounded attunement to others that I'd developed through my aikido training had brought me more friends and lovers in the preceding dozen years than many of my fellow autistics find in their lives, I was finding that apart from a few enduring friendships, I had trouble finding or maintaining deep personal connections. My romantic partnerships always ended badly; partners would push me for levels of intimacy I thought I was already giving them, then turn resentful, leaving me feeling like I was reliving my childhood experience of always being in trouble and never understanding why. No matter how active my social life and love life, I felt perpetually lonely.

Even in my aikido practice, for years the one dependable oasis of positive experience in my life, things were beginning to feel amiss. Part of it was feeling like a failure as I watched instructors with no more skill and experience than I build successful dojos in lovely spaces, while I continued to have to do my teaching in substandard settings and conditions because of a poverty and lack of organizational wherewithal from which I seemed unable to extricate myself. Part

of it was the increasingly dramatic contrast between my aikido skills on the mat and the pathetic state of every other aspect of my existence: was I even qualified to be teaching aikido—ostensibly a life-improving spiritual practice—when my own spiritual condition seemed so dismal and I plainly sucked at life? And part of it was that the more my aikido skills improved and the more I learned from the various advanced teachers I had the good fortune to get to train with at one time or another, the more I became aware that there was some higher level of grace, joy, flow, and connection that could be attained in aikido—a level which had thus far eluded me entirely. I had a nagging suspicion that my inability to find my way into this higher level of aikido practice was in some way connected to some of my other difficulties in life, and to my perpetual lack of true ease in my body, but I couldn't seem to make any headway on solving this puzzle or any of the other persistent problems in my life.

What had initially steered me toward the practice of aikido was my decision, at the age of 12, to start fighting back—a decision motivated by the fact that my life had become so unbearable that to continue as I had been was out of the question. Sixteen years later, I had once again reached a point at which continuing to live as I had been was untenable. This time, however, the sources of my suffering were far less easily identified and opposed. I wasn't being subjected to direct personal abuse and assault. Depression, poverty, barriers to access, systemic ableism, and paralyzing malaise didn't make explicit demands with which I could simply refuse to comply, didn't have faces I could punch, and didn't come at me with the sort of direct attacks to which I could smoothly

respond with aikido *waza*. The more direct slings and arrows of my childhood had eventually sparked in me the sort of blazing anger that fueled action, but my troubles as an impoverished autistic in the adult world increasingly put me in a state of dull immobilization.

It was clear that something was missing in every aspect of my life, some crucial piece. Was I missing a piece of myself, defective in some permanent way, as so many people had told me since my early childhood? I didn't know. I struggled through my life, day after day, my centered and physically confident bearing hiding an overwhelming sense of alienation and loss.

To discover the missing piece and start to set things right in my life, as it turned out, I had to supplement my aikido training with an extended immersion in an entirely new and different system of transformative practice. And while all it had taken to bring me to aikido was a need to get better at fighting and a little inspiration from the writing of Samuel R. Delany (1966), this time around it took a close encounter with death to set me on the right path.

The Time I Almost Died

In October of 1996, when I was 28 years old, I drank a bottle of contaminated juice and came down with a severe case of *E. coli* poisoning. The bottle was part of a whole batch of contaminated juice that caused 70 reported cases of *E. coli* poisoning, leading to multiple hospitalizations and one fatality (Belluck, 1998). I was one of the cases that was never reported; having neither health insurance nor money for medical care at the time, I had no one to report it to. I didn't even know the nature or cause of my sudden catastrophic illness while

it was happening; I had no Internet access at the time, and thus little access to news of the outside world while I was huddled in my apartment incapacitated by diarrhea, vomiting, pain, and fever.

For days, I lay curled up on the futon on my bedroom floor, wracked with abdominal cramps, getting up only when I had to drag myself to the bathroom for yet another bout of burning diarrhea. I couldn't keep food down, or even water; I grew increasingly feverish and weak from dehydration. I had to swish water around in my mouth to keep my lips and tongue from cracking, and then spit it out because if I swallowed any it would instantly produce a fresh surge of excruciating cramps and more diarrhea or vomiting. My raging fever alternated with chills and shivering during which nothing could get me warm. I didn't know what was making me so sick, but I knew it was killing me; I could sense, after a time, that I was nearing death. Depressed, tired, and miserable as I'd already been for a long time before the sickness hit me, I couldn't muster much will to live. After the first few days, I was delirious much of the time, in too much pain to sleep deeply and also unable to fully wake up.

There came a point at which the seething chaos of my delirium gave way to something entirely different: I found myself floating in a soundless featureless space of pale yellow, with no sense of how I got there. I seemed to be outside of my physical body; I had a location or point of view from which to look around at the empty yellowness, and a sense that my body might be located somewhere behind and below me—though I couldn't see it, and could get no sense of scale or distance in this yellow void.

I gradually became aware of another presence with me in the void. At first I sensed it as an ominous heaviness in the yellow atmosphere, a cloying psychic impression of murky swamp-water and poison and dull implacable malice. And then I could see it: some sort of monstrous bloated leech-like thing, with a face on its bulbous front end consisting of two tiny malevolent eyes above a writhing cluster of pale wormlike tentacles. I still had no sense of scale; it could have been any size, could have been any distance away from me. It swam slowly back and forth, watching me with those nasty little unblinking eyes. I understood right away that this was the thing that was killing me. Under a microscope in a laboratory it might look like nothing more than a bunch of bacteria, but here in this dreamspace I was seeing its true face.

My horror and revulsion turned abruptly to white-hot fury. I had been thinking of this illness as just another piece of impersonal bad luck that had befallen me, a view that had contributed to my sense of abject resignation. But now, suddenly, the source of my illness had a face. I could sense that it also had some manner of sentience, however dim and swampy. Suddenly there was nothing impersonal about it anymore. This wasn't random misfortune, this was an attacker—and I knew how to deal with attackers. In the depths of my misery and depression, I'd convinced myself to quietly give up and let the sickness kill me. But now I was ablaze with the same angry defiance that had led me to start fighting back against bullies when I was 12. There was no way I was going to roll over and let myself get killed by some nasty little beady-eyed tentacle-faced creature that looked like it had escaped from H. P. Lovecraft's toilet bowl.

Here in the yellow void, outside of my physical body, I experienced my fury as a field of power rapidly building up a higher and higher charge. I intuitively understood that this power could be directed through precisely the same sort of combination of imagination and will that was involved in acts of intentional *ki* extension, like unbendable arm in aikido. I focused every bit of power into willing my grotesque attacker to burn.

It was as if the creature, although still moving, had suddenly become two-dimensional, like a picture drawn on a piece of paper, and the paper had been set on fire. Flames appeared around the edges first, and then the burning edges began to shrink and curl inward. It was a bizarre sight, this thing curling and burning like a piece of paper in a fireplace. I kept the full force of my fury focused upon it, and in only a minute or so the ugly beastie had burned away to nothing.

I passed into a dreamless sleep, then woke up on my futon with my fever gone. I staggered to the kitchen, drank a glass of water, and waited. No cramps, no diarrhea. I made myself some toast and a cup of miso soup, and ate them, and then made some more. I took a shower, put on clean clothes, and went out for a walk. I'd made a complete recovery.

A Spiritual Crisis

The day after my vision and my sudden recovery from *E. coli* poisoning, as I rested and ate and stretched and started getting my strength back, I reflected upon the state of my life. There's nothing like a close brush with death to get one reflecting on one's life from a fresh perspective. It troubled me deeply that until I'd had the vision in which the *E. coli* poisoning manifested as a tentacle-faced

monster, my attitude in the face of possible impending death had been one of despair and abject resignation, accompanied by an overwhelming sense of bitter regret that my life had been so unfulfilling and had amounted to so little. I'd only snapped out of my haze of wretched despair when I had my vision—when my death suddenly had a face, which had made the matter seem more personal and aroused the same fighting spirit that had always led me to fight back against bullies. In other words, what had inspired me to fight had been the deep-seated streak of belligerent pride I'd developed on the threshold of adolescence when I'd gotten tired of being abused. I'd fought back against the revolting dreamspace manifestation of my *E. coli* poisoning because I'd instinctively perceived it as an abuser. That was all very well, but what troubled me was that prior to the vision, I'd been so pathetically ready to just give up and let myself die in misery. The *E. coli* creature had registered in my mind as an attacker worth fighting against, but my life had not registered with me as worth fighting for.

I didn't blame myself for the difficult circumstances of my life or for the fact that I'd been able to achieve so little of what I wanted. These were consequences of economic injustice, systemic ableism, and the dynamics of a warped and brutal society that denied most nonaffluent people and autistic people the opportunity to live lives worthy of their potentials. But my wretched inner state, the fact that my spirit had become so worn down by depression and bitter regret that I'd been ready to meet death in an abject state of miserable resignation, was another matter entirely—a matter that fell within the realm of spiritual crisis, and I figured my spiritual state was my own responsibility. After all, history was

full of people who'd lived their lives in slavery and other appalling conditions—compared to which my own life was vastly privileged, luxurious, and bursting with freedom and opportunity—who had nonetheless created art and story and dance and music that reflected a capacity for spiritual joy. And hadn't my own life, even amidst the traumas of my childhood, been full of moments of creativity and delight? Hadn't I been born with a natural proclivity for being moved to transcendent joy by sensory pleasures and the aesthetics of emergence? Hadn't I been blessed with the opportunity to practice aikido?

While I didn't fully understand the nature of my misery and depression, the source of my sense of alienation and loss, I now began to see them as manifestations of a long-standing spiritual crisis. And my years of aikido practice, along with numerous books I'd read over the years, had instilled in me the strong belief that spiritual crisis could and should be worked through—and thus transformed into opportunity for psychospiritual growth—by means of diligent engagement in transformative practice. True, this particular crisis had persisted and gradually worsened over many years despite my commitment to my aikido practice. But all this meant, I now saw, was that I would need to supplement my aikido training with some other form of transformative practice that was better suited to getting to the heart of this particular crisis.

I didn't know yet what the right practice would be, but I was now determined to find it. The day after the vision that ended my near-fatal bout of *E. coli* poisoning, I made a resolution as significant in my life as my resolution 16 years earlier to start fighting back against abuse: I resolved that the next time I

faced death, I'd face it as someone who was fully alive in spirit, committed to life and strong in the knowledge that life was worth fighting for—and that whenever the moment came at which my death was inevitable, I'd be prepared to meet it with the inner peace and clarity of one who'd truly lived.

Strange Magic

When I was in my late teens, a few friends and I had become very much enamored of the book *Prometheus Rising*, by Robert Anton Wilson (1983). This intriguing book was a guide to exploring the higher potentials of one's own mind, through the framework of the Eight-Circuit Model of Consciousness originally articulated by Timothy Leary. The book provided my friends and I with a useful vocabulary for discussing and conceptualizing our early efforts at self-transformation, from my aikido practice to our adventures with psychedelic drugs.

A few years later, browsing in a large New Age bookstore in Philadelphia into which I'd ducked to escape a sudden rain, I came upon a lone copy of a book called *Angel Tech: A Modern Shaman's Guide to Reality Selection*, by someone named Antero Alli (1985), which caught my eye because it had a preface by *Prometheus Rising* author Robert Anton Wilson. *Angel Tech* proved to be another book about using the Eight-Circuit Model of Consciousness as a framework for transformative psychospiritual work, inspired by Wilson's (1983) work on that topic and written with his blessing. Unlike Wilson's work, *Angel Tech* appeared to have been self-published (a long time afterward, I learned that I'd stumbled upon a rare copy of the self-published first edition). It had a sort of do-it-yourself, rough-around-the-edges punk aesthetic that set it apart from any other book on

psychospiritual work I'd encountered. Although unpolished, the author's approach to his subject matter was refreshingly playful and creative. It struck me that this was an author who possessed a certain amount of hard-won wisdom, but that much of this wisdom—like much of what I'd learned in my aikido practice, or much of my autistic sensory and cognitive experience—didn't translate readily into words. In any event, it was a unique enough book to be memorable.

At the time I had my bout with *E. coli* poisoning (several years after I first stumbled upon that copy of *Angel Tech* [Alli, 1985]), one of my housemates was a longtime friend of mine by the name of Jeremy. Jeremy was the friend who'd first introduced me to *Prometheus Rising* (Wilson, 1983); he was also familiar with *Angel Tech*. He'd followed me out from New Jersey to Berkeley, and was working at Berkeley's hippest independent video shop (this was back in the days when the way to watch a movie in one's home was to go to a video shop and rent a copy on a VHS tape). Less than 24 hours after my vision of dreamspace combat with the *E. coli* creature, and only a few hours after I'd resolved to find a practice that would enable me to work through my long-standing spiritual crisis, Jeremy came home from work with a videotape of a film entitled *Archaic Community*, which had been written, produced, and directed by Antero Alli (1991), the author of *Angel Tech*.

According to Jeremy, Alli himself had walked into the video store earlier that day and handed the videotape to him. Alli had introduced himself and explained that he'd just moved to Berkeley from Seattle a few days earlier. While living in Seattle, he'd been founder and director of a group called ParaTheatrical

ReSearch: *Archaic Community* (Alli, 1991) was a documentary film that he'd made about one of this group's projects. He was donating this copy of the documentary to the video shop Jeremy worked at, so that it could be rented and viewed by anyone who might be interested. Jeremy had accepted the donated video on behalf of the shop, and—since this was, after all, a video by the author of that intriguing book *Angel Tech*—decided that before he put it out on the shelves to be rented, he'd bring it home so that he and I could watch it.

The projects of ParaTheatrical ReSearch, as I learned from my viewing of that copy of *Archaic Community* (Alli, 1991), involved small groups of people (generally between half a dozen and a dozen) meeting to participate in experimental ritual work—not ritual in any religious sense, but in the sense of structured activities intended to facilitate access to realms of psychospiritual experience beyond that of the everyday conscious ego (Alli, 1991, 1999, 2003, 2004, 2012; Walker, 2018). These ritual experiments all utilized a particular unique system of embodiment work that Alli (2003) had developed—a “ritual technology” (p. v) which I later learned had roots in various other traditions of transformative work, particularly Jungian psychology and the experimental theatre work of Jerzy Grotowski (1968/2002). The central objective of the ParaTheatrical ReSearch ritual work was to gain direct experience of material in the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious (Jung, 1968/1980) by accessing and channeling it through the body, and giving it embodied expression through movement—a process Alli (2003) has described as an “archeology of the soul” (p. i).

Because the work was oriented toward experimentation, exploration, and direct experiential knowledge, Alli (1991, 1999, 2003) referred to the projects of ParaTheatrical ReSearch as “labs.” Each paratheatrical lab consisted of multiple sessions; the group of lab participants would meet one, two, or three times per week for a prearranged number of weeks—generally no less than five weeks and no more than a dozen—in a rented dance studio or similar open space. The membership of the crew of participants was consistent throughout a given lab—participation required a commitment to show up for every session, barring illness or emergency—but the roster of participants changed with each new lab, apart from the consistent presence of Alli himself in the capacity of both participant and director/facilitator. There were some regular participants who were considered core members by virtue of joining in nearly every lab that Alli put together, and others who rotated in and out over time. A given lab would often have a designated theme, a particular type of material—such as dreams, ancestors, initiatic experiences, or some specific archetype—which the rituals in each session sought to explore from various angles (Alli, 1991, 1999, 2003, 2004, 2012).

Archaic Community was Alli’s (1991) chronicle of one of the ParaTheatrical ReSearch labs he’d organized and facilitated in Seattle. The first thing in *Archaic Community* that really grabbed my attention was the fact that in his paratheatrical ritual work, Alli explicitly aimed to “cultivate an asocial climate” (Alli, 2003, p. 5) in order to make space for the emergence of deeper levels of process, experience, and spontaneous interaction. As discussed in

Chapter 4, my aikido training had already given me some first-hand experience of how an asocially oriented working environment could be particularly hospitable to autistic participation, and how an “asocial intent” (Alli, 2003, p. 4) could serve to facilitate the spontaneous emergence of transcendently beautiful moments of grace and complex harmony among human bodyminds. While this asocial orientation was implicitly embedded in the structure and formalities of the aikido dojo, I’d never heard an aikido teacher explicitly articulate it or speak of its value. Alli, on the other hand, was quite explicit in articulating the concept of working asocially, the absolute centrality of commitment to asociality as a foundation for his paratheatrical ritual work, and the fact that this asociality was maintained for the express purpose of enabling the emergence of transcendent moments of spontaneous harmony (Alli, 1991, 2003, 2004, 2012).

As I watched the video (Alli, 1991), it became clear that the paratheatrical work involved a far deeper and more consistent level of immersion in the asocial than I’d encountered even in the deepest and most intense aikido training sessions. The group commitment to asociality appeared to enable the participants to give themselves over to profound states of connection with the various archetypal forces that served as the foci of the various rituals, and to give spontaneous embodied expression to their relationships with those forces (see the next section of this chapter for further discussion of these ritual processes). There was something in what I was seeing in this video, something in the way some of the participants moved and interacted at certain moments in some of the rituals, that pulled at some buried part of me in a way that I couldn’t quite name.

The particular ParaTheatrical ReSearch lab chronicled in *Archaic Community* (Alli, 1991) concluded with a ritual in which each participant faced the archetype of Death, ritually meeting Death with vigorous spontaneous dance expressing their commitment to life. Given what I had personally experienced and resolved in the 24 hours or so preceding my viewing of the video, it would be somewhat of an understatement to say that this made me sit up and take notice.

The plastic case containing the VHS tape of *Archaic Community* (Alli, 1991) also contained a single folded sheet of bright red paper. As soon as the video reached its end, I reached for the sheet of paper, figuring that it might contain some typed notes from Alli about his work—I certainly wanted to know more. The paper proved to be a photocopied flier, announcing that Alli (who, as previously noted, had just moved to Berkeley) was restarting ParaTheatrical ReSearch from scratch in the Berkeley area, and was looking to recruit an initial group of participants with extensive prior experience in movement-based practices like dance, physical theatre, or martial arts.

There are few things I find as compelling and delightful as a good manifestation of the phenomenon Jung called “synchronicity” (Combs & Holland, 1990/2001; Jung, 1960/1973). Perhaps my appreciation for synchronicity is another manifestation of my proclivity for finding aesthetic joy in the emergence of complex patterns and harmonies; whatever the reason, I’ve generally chosen to follow the strange magic of synchronicity wherever it seems to be leading, with much the same sort of delighted fascination I see autistic children bring to exploring a pleasing sensory experience. This attunement to synchronicity, and

this habit of treating it as a guide, has served me well over the years. While I'm generally leery of imposing too much dogmatic interpretation on such experiences, I'm inclined to agree with this assessment by Combs and Holland (1990/2001):

Adopting a playful mood toward synchronicity means following the Trickster wherever he leads, knowing that we are led by the guide of souls. It means to lighten up—to pay attention to where the flow of coincidence leads. . . . Perhaps synchronicity is showing us some new facet of our development by leading us to a certain book, an unexpected friend, or the possibility of a new career. In such instances, one suspects the involvement of the archetypal Self and would be wise to remain alert for further cues. (p. 135)

If the Jungians are to be believed on this matter, it's not in the nature of the strange magic synchronicity to be explainable in terms of linear causality (Combs & Holland, 1990/2001). I certainly wouldn't venture to explain how or why Antero Alli's flier, seeking participants for the rebirth of ParaTheatrical ReSearch, made its way to me less than a full day after my close encounter with death and mere hours after my subsequent resolution to find a new path of transformative practice that would enable me to work through my spiritual crisis and become more fully alive. Committed engagement with transformative practice tends to bring one into contact with the realm of the transpersonal, and thus sometimes into the realm of the unexplainable. It seems only fitting, then, that an autoethnographic narrative on experiences of transformative practice should include at least some narrative element that defies conventional analysis and explanation. It is what it is, as the saying goes.

In any event, that red flier in the VHS tape case had a phone number on it. I called the number, and Antero Alli answered the phone. I set up a meeting with

him for the very next day so we could interview one another and see if I was a good fit for his work and vice versa. And about two weeks later I was at the first session of my first ParaTheatrical ReSearch lab. For the next two decades I was a core member of ParaTheatrical ReSearch, participating in nearly every lab Alli put together—usually two or three per year—until he moved away to Portland, Oregon to begin the next chapter of his life and work.

An Archeology of the Soul

Among all the activities and practices in which I've engaged during the course of my life, the ritual work of ParaTheatrical ReSearch stands out as the most difficult to describe in any way that might coherently convey it to those who haven't experienced it first-hand. Given the important role that work plays in this narrative, however, it's plainly necessary for me to attempt some sort of description at this point.

As previously noted, a ParaTheatrical ReSearch lab generally consists of a series of sessions spread out over multiple weeks, and held in a rented dance studio or some similar workspace with a large, open floor area in which to move. Each individual session of a lab is intensive, strenuous, and both physically and psychologically demanding. Sessions typically last between three and four hours—and subjectively they tend to seem longer, perhaps due to the same sort of dilated sense of time that occurs with the use of certain psychedelic drugs.

A paratheatrical lab session begins with the participants arriving in the workspace. In keeping with the commitment to the asocial intent, the participants don't speak to one another. If it's the first session of a new lab, there may be brief

gestures of greeting exchanged by friends if they encounter one another before stepping out onto the floor of the workspace; once out on the floor, though, not even the slightest flickers of greeting occur among experienced lab participants. Once one arrives, removes one's shoes, makes any necessary clothing changes, and steps out onto the workspace floor—in some ways equivalent to bowing onto the mat in a dojo—one immediately begins the independent asocial task of moving around the workspace, with the objective of simultaneously attuning to the space and giving physical expression to whatever sensations or impulses arise in the body in the process of physically relating to the space:

Take your attention off yourself and put it on the space itself. This literally means relating to the space—the setting or dance studio—rather than the things and/or people in that space. How? Discover your own way to relate with the space by the way you physically move through that space. This task can take anywhere from five to twenty minutes and initiates each paratheatrical lab with an asocial intent of spatial awareness....

The asocial intent is continued by any personal process of dropping down “out of your head” and into your body—your five senses, your impulses and rhythms. This important transition from “mental time” to “body time” cannot be taught; you find your own way into your body. (Alli, 2003, p. 5)

Alli, in his role as facilitator, allows this process to continue until he has the sense that everyone has brought themselves to a sufficient level of asociality and embodied attunement to the space. He then rings a hand-held gong to indicate that it's time to transition to the next stage of the session. The balance Alli strikes between his role as facilitator and his role as coparticipant, and the amount of direction he provides, depend largely upon the needs of the group; he leans toward the minimal when it comes to verbal guidance during lab sessions.

The first ringing of the gong is the signal for everyone to go find a place to stand somewhere on the periphery of the space, where they spend a few minutes in the state of standing meditation Alli (2003) refers to as *no-form*. No-form, an embodied “state of potential energy” (p. 7) and “profound receptivity” (p. 7), is central to the working method of ParaTheatrical ReSearch; it is the receptivity of no-form that enables participants to open themselves to the unconscious material and transpersonal forces with which paratheatrical ritual work seeks to engage (Alli, 2003, 2004, 2012). No-form is discussed further in the next section of this chapter.

From this state of no-form, participants move back out onto the floor and each participant lays claim to a small area of the workspace in which to warm up:

Once you find your personal area (or once it finds you), put your territorial instincts to work to own that space. Much like animals stalk and claim turf, find your own idiosyncratic ways to mark the outer boundaries, the center, and then proceed to take charge of this area. All animals are territorial by nature; do it on purpose and it becomes a human ritual. (Alli, 2003, p. 5)

Each participant then engages in a lengthy warmup process, which is divided into multiple stages—in one stage, for instance, the focus is on loosening up the spine, while in another stage the objective is to build up enough heat in the body to break a sweat. The overall intent of this warmup process is “feeling the body deeply” (Alli, 2003, p. 6). The warmup serves to generate high levels of energy, receptivity, and responsiveness in the body, thus priming it for the upcoming ritual work (Alli, 2003, 2012).

All of the paratheatrical ritual work involves an embodied process of what Alli refers to as “source relations” (Alli, 1991, 2003) or “sourcing” (Alli, 2012).

Sources, in this context, are whatever archetypes, energies, forces, or aspects of the self or the universe one might choose to explore through embodiment. Birth, life, death, love, fear, joy, sorrow, vanity, humility, dream, awakening, desire, chaos, order, resistance, surrender, the head, the heart, the gut, the dream-body, the bestial, the angelic, the masculine, the feminine, the divine, the Earth, the ancestors, alchemical elements, astrological forces, tarot archetypes, the Anima or Animus, the Self, and the Shadow are just a few examples of the infinite variety of possible sources that might be worked with in paratheatrical rituals (Alli, 1991, 2003, 2012).

The procedure for working with any given source is oddly simple and straightforward, at least on the surface. One begins by standing just outside the area in which the ritual will take place, and practicing no-form. One then performs an act of *conscious projection* (Alli, 2003, 2012): one simply focuses one's attention upon the physical area of the workspace in which one will be working with the source in question, and makes a strong inner declaration that this area is now designated as the realm or zone of that particular source. Having thus invoked the chosen source, one drops deeper into one's practice of no-form for a couple of minutes in order to maximize one's state of receptivity, then steps into the designated area and allows the invoked source to permeate and move one's body (Alli, 1991, 2003, 2012).

The ParaTheatrical ReSearch approach assumes that all of the possible sources one might choose to work with are already present as existing potentials within each person's body in some way or another (Alli, 2003, 2012). This

conception of archetypal forces as being present as potentials within the body is in keeping with the principle in the field of somatic psychology that holds that the body is “the site of psychic enactment” (Grand, 2012, p. 544) and that any aspect of the unconscious mind can potentially be accessed through the body (Grand, 1978, 1998, 2015b); Alli (2003, 2004), in a sense, simply interprets this principle to include the collective unconscious in addition to the personal unconscious. The technique of invoking a source by projecting it into an area of one’s workspace and then stepping into that area, then, is merely a trigger mechanism—a way of signaling to the unconscious that one is ready to connect with a source that is on some level already present as a potentiality of one’s being and one’s embodiment. The great challenge of this approach is to be receptive enough to the chosen source that one can allow it to shape one’s embodiment and determine one’s physical movements—to relax the pernicious tendency of the conscious ego to second-guess or over-control, so that one can give oneself over to a source and be moved by it from within:

Allow its energy to fill the previous No-Form state of receptivity. Let it expand [to fill] your body, moving you this way and that. Allow it to infuse your experience with its quality, color and intensity. The orientation here is non-directional, rather than directional; the energy itself guides the direction rather than our personal will. This requires an ability to relax the desire to control or direct the energy. When the force of energy is strong enough to move your body, you follow its direction. By creating space for its expression, you are moved by the energy. Like clay in the hands of a sculptor, we learn to be “shaped” before we start shaping. Allow yourself to be “created” before you start creating. This non-directional orientation takes practice and is nurtured by the authenticity of your No-Form state; the deeper the No-Form, the deeper we can be impressed and moved by a given source. (Alli, 2003, p. 8)

When primed by a vigorous physical warmup and a sufficiently deep state of no-form, and with sufficient commitment to staying attuned to the chosen source and allowing oneself to be moved by it, the result of this ritual practice is the emergence of “spontaneous gestures, movements, patterns of motion, sounds, vocal creations, [and] characterizations” (Alli, 2003, p. 1). As one allows the source to find physical expression through one’s body in this way, an escalating cycle or feedback loop emerges: the act of channeling the source through one’s body—of giving one’s body over to patterns of movement and expression quite alien to the embodiment habits of the everyday conscious ego—brings one deeper into the state of altered consciousness or transpersonal experience induced by one’s connection to the source, and this deepened connection with the source enables an even fuller embodiment of it and further emergence of spontaneous bodily expressions, which in turn further deepens the connection with the source and the associated state of altered consciousness, and so on. I can attest to the fact that for those with sufficient aptitude and practice in this paratheatrical method, this sort of cycle can produce peak experiences during paratheatrical rituals that are as intensely psychedelic as any LSD or psilocybin trip.

After the warmup, and before launching into the group ritual work that occupies most of each lab session, comes a brief stage in which each participant engages in a round of solo ritual work within the same personal area in which they did their warmup. Generally, for this solo ritual, each participant chooses for themselves what sources they invoke and explore. Like every other paratheatrical ritual, these solo rituals begin and end with the practice of no-form. In addition to

being essential for cultivating the necessary receptivity at the beginning of a ritual, no-form is equally essential at the end of a ritual, as a means of releasing the energies with which one has been working; one experiences profoundly altered states of consciousness during paratheatrical ritual work, and it's not advisable to go back into the regular world afterward with one's bodymind still bubbling and blazing and crackling with some wild archetypal energy high (Alli, 2003).

After this brief stage of solo ritual, the remainder of each session is devoted to group ritual work. The group rituals are the main event, the real meat of the paratheatrical work. All of the solo warmup and preparation work that occupies the first hour or so of each session is intended to enable the participants to tune into the spatial, somatic, and transpersonal realms deeply enough that they can maintain these attunements while sharing the space with others and interacting with others, rather than getting drawn back into a social mindset and the social habits, reactions, and agendas of the everyday conscious ego (Alli, 1991, 2003, 2012). This goal of maintaining attunement with sources while in interaction with other participants is discussed further below, in the section entitled "Miraculous Interactions."

For the group rituals, Alli, in his role as facilitator, decides what sources the group will be working with and how the rituals will be structured, and briefly communicates this information to the group at the beginning of each new ritual. Many group rituals involve more than one source, with different physical areas of the workspace designated as the realms of different sources; just as there's an

infinite array of possible sources one might work with, there are many possible ritual structures that can be used for working with those sources in different ways.

One ritual structure frequently used in paratheatrical lab sessions, for example, is the “group polarization” (Alli, 1991, 2003, 2012), which begins with the participants practicing no-form while standing in a line down the center of the workspace. All of the space to one side of this line is dedicated to one source, and all of the space to the other side is dedicated to a second source that can function as a complement or flip-side to the first source—it might be life on one side and death on the other, for instance, or resistance and surrender, or masculine and feminine, or any other complementary or polarized pair of sources. Each participant moves back and forth between one side of the room and the other at their own pace, engaging with the two sources in alteration. Another standard paratheatrical ritual structure involves dividing the space into a series of two to four zones, with each zone dedicated to a different source. The participants start out lined up side-by-side in no-form at one end of the space, and each participant proceeds gradually forward and makes the journey across the room at their own pace, passing through each zone and engaging with each source in succession; this particular ritual structure lends itself well to working with sets of interrelated sources that form potentially interesting sequences for exploration, such as head/heart/gut or birth/life/death/rebirth. These are just two examples of the enormous variety of possible ways in which paratheatrical rituals can be structured (Alli, 1991, 1999, 2003, 2012).

Each paratheatrical lab session typically involves three or four group rituals in succession, with the different rituals often sharing a theme and building upon one another in some way. Each separate ritual begins and ends with the practice of no-form; in between rituals there are also brief transitional periods in which the participants jog in circles around the periphery of the workspace in order to build up heat in the body. After the final group ritual of the night—often a climactic one that’s longer and more intense than the preceding ones—there’s a final period of no-form and another brief jog around the edge of the space, and then the group gathers and sits in a circle in the center of the space. In this closing circle the participants finally drop the asociality they’ve been maintaining since their arrival, and share stories of what they experienced during the session (Alli, 1991, 1999, 2003, 2012).

There’s a great deal more that could be written about the work of ParaTheatrical ReSearch, and about the practice of excavating and exploring material from the personal and collective unconscious by accessing it through the body and allowing it to find spontaneous expression through the vehicle of the body. Any effort at a truly comprehensive discussion of this work, however, would fall outside the scope of this present inquiry. A wealth of further information can be found in the various writings and documentary films of Antero Alli (1991, 1999, 2003, 2004, 2012) cited throughout this section. I believe the preceding outline provides sufficient context for the remaining sections of this chapter, in which I examine how my autistic cognitive and perceptual style affected my participation in the work of ParaTheatrical ReSearch, and how my

participation in that work served to influence my own process of psychospiritual development and self-actualization.

In my aikido practice, certain qualities of autistic perception had ultimately proven advantageous, while other aspects of autistic neurology—particularly dyspraxia—had posed significant difficulties for me. The peculiar work of ParaTheatrical ReSearch, however, was one context in which being autistic functioned almost entirely as an asset. The fundamental qualities of autistic perception and cognition (discussed in detail back in Chapter 2) turned out to be remarkably well-suited to the paratheatrical working methods; those autistic qualities translated into a strong natural affinity for two elements of the paratheatrical work that are particularly essential to the work’s aims and that also tend to be particularly challenging for most (non-autistic) participants: asocial engagement and no-form, discussed in the next two sections.

Miraculous Interactions

Alli refers to transpersonal sources as vertical sources, in contrast to the everyday realm of horizontal interaction with the everyday social and material world. When two or more people can interact with one another while simultaneously maintaining “vertical integrity” (Alli, 2003, p. 2)—in other words, while continuing to prioritize their connections with vertical sources, and continuing to allow themselves to be authentically moved and guided by those vertical sources instead of by the horizontal social agendas and impulses of the conscious ego—the result is the spontaneous emergence of what Alli (2003) terms “miraculous interactions” (p. 1):

One way to look at the miraculous is through the prism of a certain kind of double vision. Imagine an overlay of ... planes of existence: vertical and horizontal. Picture vertical as the invisible sources of energy innate to soul, ancestral karma, dreambody, archetypes, planetary consciousness. Horizontal sources and energies refer to visible manifestations of our interactions with others, society, political realities, and the out-there world at large. Vertical is up, down, and within; horizontal, out there around and across. ... When individuals choose to interact among themselves from a higher commitment to vertical integrity, conditions are primed for witnessing and engaging the miraculous. When this occurs, a unity prevails that doesn't negate individuation but allows for its simultaneous unfolding. (pp. 1–2)

In the context of paratheatrical ritual work, impulses toward horizontal social agendas generally show up as temptations to perform: to improvisationally act out one's ideas and feelings about a source, or about how the ritual and one's movements "should" be unfolding, rather than allowing the source itself to direct one's movements; to exert excessive conscious control over one's actions based on socially learned inhibitions or on desires to connect with or make favorable impressions on others in the room (Alli, 1999, 2003). When vertical integrity is lost and horizontal social impulses prevail, profound states of direct connection with transpersonal forces—and the authentic embodied expression of those states through the emergence of spontaneous physical movement and vocalization—become supplanted by self-conscious playacting, and the ritual work "can rapidly degenerate into histrionics, horseplay, and pseudo group therapy sessions" (Alli, 2003, p. 28).

When a group of participants can maintain their individual vertical integrity while sharing space and coming into interaction with one another within the context of the paratheatrical work, however, the results can be truly extraordinary. With sufficient vertical integrity, the simple intent of invoking and

being moved by a given source within a given area of space can produce communal flow states and peak experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990/2008, 1993) in which group rituals of exquisite complexity and transcendent power and beauty—incorporating intricate alien choreographies, ecstatic wordless songs and chants, and elaborate ritualistic actions and interactions that feel profoundly resonant with sacred significance—emerge spontaneously, entirely unplanned and unrehearsed, seemingly straight from the collective unconscious (Alli, 1991, 1999, 2003, 2004).

In aikido, I'd found a practice in which it was possible to physically participate in that phenomenon in which I'd always found such fascination and aesthetic joy: the emergence of complex harmony and sublime grace from chaos. In the group ritual work of ParaTheatrical ReSearch, I experienced this embodied participation in the beauty of emergence to a far greater degree, in ways that tended to be deeper and more sustained. Once I began experiencing these spontaneous group ritual interactions firsthand in lab sessions, I had to agree with Alli that “miraculous” was an apt description.

There was something about the interactions that arose among participants in paratheatrical rituals, when everyone involved was prioritizing vertical integrity over norms of sociality, that felt not only miraculous but also just plain right, on some deep visceral level, as if this were the way I was naturally meant to interact. I'd experienced some taste of this feeling—albeit less consistently and to a considerably lesser degree—in aikido, where the rules of formal dojo etiquette imparted a spaciousness, ease, and grace to interpersonal interaction that had been

unprecedented in my prior experiences of trying to interact with other humans. The experience was far more pronounced, however, in the paratheatrical labs.

Autism has traditionally been portrayed as a state of disconnection, and autistics stereotyped as cut off from the world, incapable of connection, impaired in the realm of interactivity (Biklen, 2005; Gernsbacher & Frymiare, 2005; McGuire, 2016; Silberman, 2015; Smukler, 2005; Yergeau, 2013, 2018). But what I see in my own experiences and in the accounts of various other autistic authors (e.g., Baggs, 2007; Mukhopadhyay, 2003, 2008, 2015; Prahlad, 2017; Prince-Hughes, 2004, 2013; Savarese, 2014, 2018; D. Williams, 1999) is not so much a pathological state of disconnection or lack of interactive capacity, as an innate proclivity for connection and attunement to certain aspects of the vertical that supersedes and is incompatible with attunement to neurotypical norms of horizontal sociality.

Autistic asociality is not the asociality of pathological disconnect, but an “ecologically oriented” (Yergeau, 2018, p. 71) asociality; it seems to me that autistics, to whatever degree it hasn’t been beaten out of them by neurotypical attempts to push them into the performance of horizontal “compulsory sociality” (Dolmage, 2014, pp. 114–115), incline naturally and instinctually toward a vertically attuned or animistic (Savarese, 2014) asocial relationality remarkably similar to the asocial mode of engagement that the participants in ParaTheatrical ReSearch labs eventually learn to cultivate and maintain. “This asociality, while often represented by clinicians as a nonsociality, is inherently relational” (Yergeau, 2018, p. 19).

The asocial mode of prioritizing vertical integrity while engaging with others, as practiced in the paratheatrical labs, was thus a rediscovery for me of a lost and forgotten autistic potential: a highly sensitive way of interacting that carefully honored the autonomy and spirit of all parties by allowing enough space for whatever each person needed to do to attend to and embody their own relations with the vertical. A sacred mode of interaction that was far more natural for me than the arbitrary and intrusive banalities of compulsory normative sociality, but which I'd never had the chance to truly know or engage in because no one else around me had understood how to do it.

And so, while other (non-autistic) newcomers to ParaTheatrical ReSearch struggled to get beyond their ingrained habits of horizontal sociality, I took to the paratheatrical mode of asocial engagement like the proverbial duck to water. The depth, integrity, and transformative power of my paratheatrical lab work were enhanced by this aptitude for the asocial, just as my asocial tendencies had proven to be assets in certain aspects of my aikido practice. And in group work of this sort, the quality of each participant's commitment and energetic presence affects the quality of every other participant's experience; thus, as Alli and various ParaTheatrical ReSearch participants were occasionally kind enough to mention to me over the years, this affinity of mine for the asocial ended up being of benefit not only to me, but served to deepen and enrich the experiences of my fellow lab participants as well.

I didn't give much thought to the nature of my affinity for this sort of work, or to its possible connection to autism, until my fellow autistic

autoethnographer Dawn Prince-Hughes (2004) released her book *Songs of the Gorilla Nation*. Prince-Hughes was a primatologist whose particular version of autistic consciousness and cognition gave her a profound empathic connection with gorillas. She and gorillas seemed to intuitively understand one another; she suspected her experience of the world was more like that of a gorilla than like that of a non-autistic human. I'd been a core member of ParaTheatrical ReSearch for eight years when I first read her book, and some of her descriptions of how she saw gorillas interacting, and how she wished other humans could interact, seemed intriguingly familiar:

I became aware of the intricate dances they did together in order to remain intact in the group individually while keeping a bubble of private spirit around them. They made it seem effortless and unintentional. ... I understood this way of being, but I could never find other people who understood its rules. It was as if human people had lost the ability to dance to this music. (pp. 56–57)

No-Form

As noted in my earlier description of what goes on in a paratheatrical lab session, the embodied “state of potential energy” (Alli, 2003, p. 7) called no-form plays a central and indispensable role in the work of ParaTheatrical ReSearch. No-form derives from the Zen Buddhist practice of cultivating a state of *mushin*, or no-mind (Suzuki, 1972). No-form is no-mind brought into embodiment; in no-form, the awake yet deeply relaxed and spacious open-sky mental state of no-mind is accompanied by an awake yet deeply relaxed and spacious receptivity of the body.

No-Form is approached in a standing position, rather than the traditional zazen sitting posture. Here, the “uncarved block of our potential state” is valued more as a precursor to action than as a gateway to Buddhist

samadhi. The No-Form stance is a position for cultivating profound receptivity to vertical sources. Look at No-Form as a device, a tool, for charging (at the start of each ritual) and discharging (at the end of each ritual) subjective identification with whatever archetypal forces or energies are to be accessed, embodied, and expressed. (Alli, 2003, p. 7)

No-form “acts as a bridge to the internal landscape of archetypal material” (Alli, 2003, p. 107). The receptivity of no-form allows one to attune to a source and be responsive to it on a deep bodily level, so that the source and one’s relationship to it can be given spontaneous expression through the medium of one’s embodiment, physical movements, and voice. No-form is the key that can open the bodymind to being authentically and spontaneously moved from within like this, the key to vertical source relations and vertical integrity; “the deeper the No-Form, the deeper [one] can be impressed and moved by a given source” (Alli, 2003, p. 8). Without a sufficiently deep state of no-form, vertical integrity becomes nigh-impossible to cultivate or maintain (Alli, 2003, 2012).

Obviously, then, one’s capacity to participate fully and meaningfully in the paratheatrical ritual work, and to truly experience the work’s profound consciousness-expanding and transformative capacities, depends very much upon one developing the ability to find one’s way into a state of no-form (Alli, 2003, 2012). For most paratheatrical lab participants, it can take a good deal of committed practice and experimentation—often over the course of weeks or months—to be able to find their way into no-form; it generally takes even longer to learn to access no-form quickly and consistently. For me, though, it was different: beginning with my very first paratheatrical lab session, after just a few

brief words of explanation and instruction from Alli, I found that I was able to instantly plunge into a deep state of no-form at will.

As noted in Chapter 2, the varieties of transpersonal experience that have been reported by some autistics include descriptions of states of pure consciousness, mindlessness, emptiness, “just being” (Bogdashina, 2013, p. 145) or “pure/true self” (p. 144) which seem more or less identical or analogous to the Zen state of no-mind or the mental state associated with deep no-form.

Bogdashina (2013), one of the few researchers to devote any attention to autistic spiritual experiences, quotes one autistic correspondent as reporting that she regards “mind emptiness” (p. 145) as “one of the gifts of autism” (p. 145), and another as stating that “mindlessness is a state of perfect bliss, of ‘just being’” (p. 145). Bogdashina notes that “In autism the experience of ‘true/pure self’ is often spontaneous, or easily achieved (if voluntary)” (p. 144).

As with the other varieties of transpersonal experience for which some autistics have reported an exceptional proclivity, it seems to me that this affinity for the state of no-mind—and, by extension, my own heightened capacity for bringing no-mind into physical embodiment in the practice of no-form—has its origins in the same distinctive qualities of autistic consciousness already discussed at length in Chapter 2. Consider Manning’s (2013) characterization of autistic consciousness—accurate, in my experience—as tending toward liminal states in which the informational field is not automatically parsed or “pre-chunked” (p. 219) into a fixed world of discrete subjects, objects, concepts, and certainties, but is instead experienced as a “field of resonance” (p. 177), alive with

potential and “morphability” (p. 219). In her attempts to describe this elusive and nigh-indescribable autistic experience of the morphable and un-chunked field of resonance, Manning might just as well be describing the experience of no-mind or no-form; no-form can perhaps best be conceived of as what one gets when this liminal state of morphability and attunement to the field of resonance is brought into embodiment as a physical stance of receptivity and potential action.

Manning (2013) goes on to state that this tendency of autistic consciousness to “dwell in the shaping” (p. 177) “results in a mode of existence that moves not from self to self, or self to other, but from dynamic constellation to dynamic constellation” (p. 219). Interestingly, movement from dynamic constellation to dynamic constellation also seems a perfect way of describing the activity of participant bodyminds in the miraculous interactions that emerge in paratheatrical rituals.

A Terrible Thing to Lose

In somatic psychology, as touched upon in Chapter 4, self and psyche are understood as being constructed and organized somatically. A significant aspect of this somatic self-organization is the process through which “the self develops defenses against aspects of itself” (Grand, 2015b, p. 209), repressing inclinations, impulses, feelings, excitations, and modes of embodiment that are in one way or another unsafe to give expression to in a person’s developmental environment. This process occurs on an embodied level, “largely unconsciously” (p. 215), through the accumulation of the chronic inhibitory tensions—“patterns of muscular holding that inhibit certain expressions, gestures, and feelings” (p.

210)—sometimes referred to in the field of somatic psychology as character armor (Büntig, 2015; Reich, 1933/1972; E. W. L. Smith, 1985).

The organism is ... a pulsating, excitatory process ... a source of erotic delight and engagement with the world. ... In opposition to these primordial processes, the person enacts muscular rigidities and flaccidities, interferences in their breathing patterns, and inhibited movements that are all structured as introjected familial and societal injunctions against them. Unconsciously, the person represses particular impulses and effects those repressions through somatic means. (Grand, 2015b, p. 214)

When I was a student in the Somatic Psychology graduate program at California Institute of Integral Studies—by which time I was in my late 30s and had already been a core member of ParaTheatrical ReSearch for a decade—I had the privilege of studying under Ian J. Grand, who is quoted above and at many points throughout this dissertation. Grand’s writing and teaching have been invaluable to me in the task of understanding and articulating the nature of my transformative experiences in aikido and ParaTheatrical ReSearch. Laying out the essence of his philosophy of somatics in an illuminating essay entitled “The Marvelous in the Real,” Grand (1978) observed that each person’s capacity for long-term psychological wellbeing and overall thriving or self-actualization is intimately tied to their ability “to follow the promptings of their own organism in its ongoing desire to shape itself anew” (p. 39). In Grand’s view—consistent with the views of many practitioners in the field of somatics, myself included—the human bodymind in its natural and most vital state is fluid, adaptable, responsive, and continually self-creating at a somatic or organismic level. The accumulation of character armor, unfortunately, has the effect of suppressing this vital organismic dance of ongoing spontaneous self-creation and “self shaping” (p. 38).

In repressing the impulses, feelings, and self-embodiments that are unwelcome, unsupported, unacceptable, or unsafe to enact in the developmental environment, the bodymind gets locked into a narrow and limited range of acquired habits of embodiment—as Grand (1978) describes it, “fixed feelings and behaviors we have learned” (p. 40). “In the development of the social self we tend to fix ourselves somatically so that we do not experience our constant forming” (p. 36). The armor that defends also restricts and imprisons.

From birth, to the best of my knowledge—certainly from as far back into my early childhood as I can remember—I instinctively responded to the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the world by dancing with it, exploring it with all my senses and allowing myself to move in whatever ways best enabled me to find coherence in it, to modulate its uncomfortable aspects, and to delight in its sensory wonders. In other words, I engaged with the world through a perpetual fluid dance of stimming (as discussed and defined in Chapter 2).

There’s a surviving photo of me in my toddler years, taken during an outing to a park: I’m kneeling on the ground beside a flattish, roundish rock about the same size as me, engrossed in exploring its texture with my hands. My few happy fragments of early childhood memory are all of such moments: moments in which I could devote my full presence and attention to engaging with some specific sensory wonder through stimming—whether it was feeling certain textures against my skin, being absorbed by the sight and sound of a column of living water in a fountain, or running at top speed across an open field. Whenever I had the chance to fully indulge in such pleasures—especially the ones with a

strong kinesthetic or tactile component, like vigorously rocking back and forth or running the palms of my hands along the cool smooth surface of a wall—doing so invariably helped me to integrate the whole of my sensory experience, temporarily lending my perceptual world an increased coherence and navigability (Walker, 2018).

All of my own lived experiences, studies, and years of observing and speaking with fellow autistics have served to convince me that for the autistic, stimming is an integral aspect of the essential organismic self and is central to how that self naturally dances its organismic dance of “constant moving and shaping” (Grand, 1978, p. 38) in profoundly responsive “engagement with the world” (p. 214). Sadly, as discussed in the preceding section, when the developmental environment is inimical to certain aspects of any person’s organismic dance of self-embodiment, those aspects are repressed and become buried under character armor, at the expense of the person’s long-term wellbeing. And in the developmental environment of the neurotypical-dominated social world, the natural organismic dance of autistic embodiment and engagement—especially those manifestations of the dance that fall within the broad category of stimming—are met with particular hostility.

In one shard of early memory I’m in kindergarten, walking around the playground. Just walking and walking, a favorite activity throughout my life. Feels good, helps me integrate. I’m letting my hands move around as they are wont to do, letting them hover in the air around me, now flapping like butterflies, now floating like seaweed. No language created by non-autistic people has words

for what this does for me. I'm jolted by the sudden sound of boys laughing. I look and see a group of bigger kids horsing around nearby. I think they're the same boys who taunted me and hit me at recess a couple of days ago, calling me "freak" and "retard." This time it's not me they're laughing at, but they might turn their attention to me at any moment. I remember that other kids have mocked and sometimes assaulted me for the way I move my hands. It occurs to me that if these boys spot my hands moving it will draw their attention. I quickly jam my hands into my pockets and walk on, pretending to be going somewhere. The boys ignore me. It worked! Next time I walk around the playground, I keep my hands in my pockets. It makes me a little bit safer, and I barely notice that I feel a little bit less alive (Walker, 2018).

While my early childhood memories are admittedly somewhat fragmented by trauma, I don't think this particular incident was the very last time in my childhood I moved my hands like that; it's just one moment I happen to remember, one representative glimpse. The suppression of my many and varied visible stimming habits was a long and gradual process that extended throughout my childhood and adolescence, and even the stifling of any one specific form of stimming, such as those particular hand movements, probably can't be boiled down to any single decisive moment. To repress the embodiment of one's truest and most vital self, to extinguish the unique dance by which that self intuitively seeks to engage with the world, takes countless tiny decisions, most of which end up lost to conscious memory if they were even consciously made in the first place. A gradual accumulation of moments in which the spontaneous organismic

dance of stimming is put on lockdown for the sake of the partial safety of briefly passing for seminormal, until the lockdown becomes habit and the dance is buried and forgotten under layers of rigid character armor (Grand, 1978, 2015b; Reich, 1933/1972; Walker, 2018).

In the swirlings of organismic processes, there is, simply, an intelligence, a self-identity and a direction prior to the functioning of the social self. There is an organismic mind, an organismic self that we are, the very wellspring of our existence. (Grand, 1978, p. 38)

That fluid, spontaneous, swirling aliveness, that self-shaping organismic intelligence that Grand (1978) called the organismic self, child psychology pioneer D. W. Winnicott (1965) named the True Self. And the process to which Grand (1978) referred when he wrote, “In the development of the social self we tend to fix ourselves somatically [through accumulation of character armor] so that we do not experience our constant forming” (p. 36), Winnicott described in terms of the formation of a False Self.

When the True Self’s organismic dance of spontaneous embodied engagement and expression are unwelcome in the developmental social environment, the False Self serves the “defensive function” (Winnicott, 1965, p. 142) of presenting a more socially acceptable embodied persona to the world. For the autistic, it’s the True Self that traces patterns in the air with stimming fingers, and the False Self that keeps its hands in its pockets. “The spontaneous gesture is the True Self in action” (Winnicott, 1965, p. 148), while to whatever extent a person’s True Self has become eclipsed by a False Self, “[that] person is caught in ... restrictive, socially objectified movements and expressions that do not lead to feelings of renewal and participation in life” (Grand, 1998, p. 189). When I try

to explain Winnicott’s theories to fellow autistics, most of them instantly grasp my meaning when I say that the False Self is the self with quiet hands.

The formation of a False Self is not innately unhealthy; optimally, the False Self can develop and function as an adaptable social persona that allows sufficient space for the creative and spontaneous activity of the True Self. But when the expressions of True Self are particularly unwelcome and unsafe during childhood development, and there is substantial pressure to comply with demands of social performance that leave little room for the activity of the True Self, the result is a split in which the True Self is suppressed (locked away behind character armor, though Winnicott [1965] didn’t use that particular term) and eclipsed by “[a] split-off compliant False Self which is mistaken for the whole child” (Winnicott, 1965, p. 150).

This locking away of the True Self behind a compliant False Self happens to many autistics as a result of being subjected throughout childhood to pervasive pressures to suppress visible autistic traits and comply with neurotypical behavioral norms (Asasumasu, 2013b; S. R. Jones, 2016; Walker, 2014, 2018; A. Williams, 2018; Yergeau 2018), and it’s what had happened to me. The consequences of suppressing the embodiment of the autistic True Self—the self that can be profoundly engaged with “the world in its morphability” (Manning, 2013, p. 219) through the spontaneous organismic dance of stimming—can be devastating to psychological wellbeing. The largest study on the topic found that long-term habitual “camouflaging” (Cassidy et al., 2018, p. 11) of outwardly visible expressions of autism “significantly predicted suicidality in [adult

autistics], after controlling for age, sex, ... employment, and satisfaction with living arrangements” (p. 11), and that “camouflaging is directly associated with suicidality” (p. 11).

The living spontaneous dance of the True Self is a terrible thing to lose. Winnicott (1965) observed that “where there is a high degree of split between the True Self and the False Self which hides the True Self, there is found a poverty of [fully engaged] living ... [and an] extreme restlessness, an inability to concentrate” (p. 150). Loss of access to the embodied experience of the True Self often “results in a feeling unreal or a sense of futility” (p. 148), and a diminished capacity to be fully present with and connected with others: “In living relationships ... the False Self begins to fail. In situations in which what is expected is a whole person the False Self has some essential lacking” (pp. 142–143). The capacity for creativity—for creative living and spontaneous creative exploration—is also impacted; Winnicott (1965) believed that “[o]nly the True Self can be creative” (p. 148), while Grand (2015b), considering the same issue from a somatic perspective, noted that “the way that a child plays and explores the world is also structured bodily” (p. 215) and that therefore, in the accumulation of character armor that suppresses the dance of the organismic self,

creative play and participation in the making and forming of possibility can be restricted. Movements, excitations, and creative manipulations of the world are stopped through muscular holding. Play with expression and the following of one’s impulses in [creative media], movement, and sounds are inhibited. (p. 215)

In some of his later work, in fact, Winnicott (1971/2005) boiled down the whole essential tension between the fluid and spontaneous True Self and the

armored False Self to a tension between creativity and compliance. Winnicott made it quite clear where he stood in this regard: “In some way or other our theory includes a belief that living creatively is a healthy state, and that compliance is a sick basis for life” (Winnicott, 1971/2005, p. 88).

This, then, was the nature of the enduring state of psychospiritual crisis in which I’d lived my whole young adulthood, the same state of crisis that had eventually led me to ParaTheatrical ReSearch. The depression and anger; the inability to be at ease in the world or in my own body; the difficulty making or maintaining personal connections; the paralyzing anxiety and loss of mental clarity that rose up and overwhelmed me whenever I tried to implement any plan of action to improve my life; the creative blockage; the constant sense of futility, alienation, loss, loneliness, and despair—all of this, I eventually came to understand, was symptomatic of the loss of my capacity to access and embody the dance of my True Self in all its vital, stimmy, ever-emerging, autistic beauty.

Awakening

In the framework of somatic theory and praxis conceived by Wilhelm Reich (1933/1972) and refined and elaborated upon by subsequent generations of somatic psychologists like Grand (2015b), the realization of human potentials for thriving and self-actualization involves a process of de-armorizing, of loosening and releasing the strictures of character armor in order to liberate the flow of the primal organismic dance of vitality (Büntig, 2015; Grand, 2015b; Reich, 1933/1972; E. W. L. Smith, 1985) and restore the capacity to vibrantly embody “a constant moving and shaping, a shimmering geometry of organismic activity”

(Grand, 1978, p. 38)—a process, in other words, of liberating the suppressed embodiment of the True Self.

This recovery process can be effected through repeated performance of bodily enactments—ways of moving, breathing, feeling, and so on—that push against the boundaries of one’s character armor and extend beyond whatever limits that armor normally imposes on one’s range of bodily enactment and experience (Grand, 1978, 1982, 1998, 2015b,; Heckler, 1984; Kepner, 2001; E. W. L. Smith, 1985).

When we work somatically we are enabled to alter our felt time and our felt space. We can literally reorganize our relationship to parts of ourselves that have been excluded from our world view. By altering our metabolism, our oxygenation, the way we hold ourselves, our pattern of movement, it becomes possible to discover other feelings, other desires and other qualities of presence from those of our everyday life. We are enabled to reorganize the place of our identity from the fixed feelings and behaviors we have learned and practiced to the inner thrust and rhythms of our own organism. (Grand, 1978, p. 40)

Much of the transformative potential of somatic practices such as aikido and the paratheatrical ritual work is based in the capacity of these practices to liberate natural organismic fluidity, responsiveness, and vitality and from the strictures of character armor. Prior to beginning my work with ParaTheatrical ReSearch, I’d already experienced this to some degree in aikido, where such processes are traditionally spoken of in terms of restoring and cultivating openness to the flow of *ki* (Leonard, 1999, 2001; W. Palmer, 2002; Saotome, 1993). The reclaiming of suppressed organismic capacities by enacting embodiments outside the habitual range delimited by character armor can be readily seen in aikido—for instance, in the practice of intentionally moving in a

relaxed and expansive way in response to physical attacks that would ordinarily produce an automatic reaction of increased defensive or counter-aggressive tension. The rigid, pulled-inward embodiment I developed in defensive reaction to childhood trauma was a textbook case of extreme character armoring, and my process of emerging from that painfully stiff and shrunken embodiment into a new embodiment of relaxed expansiveness and fluid responsiveness in the course of my aikido training is a perfect example of a somatic process of de-armoring and recovering access to suppressed potentialities for organismic self-shaping.

When I began participating in the paratheatrical ritual work, I quickly began to experience this same sort of transformative somatic process at a far deeper level and in a far more intense and accelerated way than I'd ever experienced it in my aikido training or anywhere else. My strong affinity for no-form made it possible for me to open myself quite deeply to vertical sources, and to the resulting altered states of consciousness and embodied enactments. Since the paratheatrical work involves giving spontaneous bodily expression to the vertical sources one works with, the depth of my no-form states and the consequent depth of my connections with the vertical meant that in every lab session a wide variety of profoundly strange and intense full-body gestures, ritual actions, archetypal characterizations, sounds, songs, dances, and patterns of movement were being channeled and spontaneously expressed through my body.

With sustained commitment to any good movement-based practice or regular sessions with a good bodyworker, combined with a mindful approach to everyday use of the body, it can be a relatively straightforward process to loosen

and shed superficial muscular tensions. The more deeply ingrained layers of character armor, however—held continually and unconsciously for many years, and often established so early in the developmental process that they’ve played a significant role in shaping the body and self-experience (Büntig, 2015; Grand, 2015b; Reich, 1933/1972; E. W. L. Smith, 1985)—do not release their grip so easily. When Wilhelm Reich (1933/1972) began developing techniques of breathing and bodywork to break down character armor in the bodies of his psychotherapy clients in the 1930s, he found that all of the suppressed energy and emotion associated with whatever aspects of experience and embodied expression the character armor had been keeping locked away was still present in the body, “bound into [the] armor” (as cited in Büntig, 2015, p. 58). Any significant release in the physical tensions of character armor tended to be accompanied by a release of some portion of the organismic energy and feeling which was bound up in and repressed by that armor (Büntig, 2015; Reich, 1933/1972). Releases of this sort often took the form of extreme “cathartic reactions” (Büntig, 2015, p. 58) which included powerfully intense waves of “involuntary clonic muscle convulsions” accompanied by “the most vehement emotional discharges” (p. 59).

The physical enactments that manifested in my body as I opened myself to various vertical sources in the paratheatrical ritual work moved through me at such a deep level that they soon began to break down deep layers of my character armor, and during the paratheatrical lab sessions I began to experience precisely the same sort of intense cathartic phenomena reported by Reich (1933/1972). Whenever my character armor impeded the free flow and spontaneous physical

expression of vertical energies through my body, those energies would act upon me in ways that broke down the offending armor from within; in this process, my body would be wracked to its depths by cathartic convulsive spasms of extraordinary power and violence, rippling through me in wave after wave until the long-held chronic tensions that had constituted that portion of my armoring were discharged and eliminated so that the vertical source with which I was working at the time could channel itself through me more fully and smoothly. It was as if those vertical energies, or some aspect of my own being beyond my conscious ego, were performing Reichian bodywork on me from the inside out.

An escalating cycle emerged in my paratheatre work: the deeper I could drop into no-form, the more fully I could open myself to being moved by vertical energies. The more I opened myself to vertical energies, the more those energies moved through me in ways that broke down character armor. And the more character armor I shed in those cathartic releases, the more deeply and thoroughly I could drop into no-form ... thus enabling me to become an even more open conduit for vertical energies, which resulted in further cathartic release of armor, which enabled even deeper access to no-form, and so on.

Reich and his successors noted that following the release of deep layers of character armor, their clients would experience waves of energetic tremors and vibrations streaming through their bodies (Büntig, 2015; E. W. L. Smith, 1985). These “streamings” (Büntig, 2015, p. 59), which “were produced through the liberation of the energy from muscular tensions” (p. 59) and which included “various types of sensations of warmth, tingling in the skin, and ... trembling in

the limbs and trunk” (p. 59), would gradually grow into “a pulsating reflexive movement” (p. 59) throughout the body. As my cyclical process of increasing de-armor and deepening no-form progressed, I started experiencing this phenomenon; at first it was intermittent, but over time it began happening every single time I went into no-form. Eventually I reached a point at which I became able to instantly drop at will into a profound state of no-form in which my body would spontaneously release all accumulated muscular tensions, wildly shaking and vibrating as the liberated energy coursed through me and surged up my spine in ecstatic waves—an experience reminiscent of accounts of the phenomena that some yogic traditions refer to as “kundalini awakenings” (Sannella, 1992; Scotton, 1996). To this day, I’m still able to do this at will, with no preliminary warmup, anytime and anywhere—though I avoid doing it in front of most people because it’s so strange and intense that I expect most folks would think I was having some exotic variety of massive seizure. It’s a useful somatic trick that discharges stress and tension, keeps armor from accumulating, clears and opens the heart and mind, leaves me refreshed and invigorated, and reconnects me with what Grand (1978) so aptly described as the “shimmering geometry” (p. 38) of my essential organismic self.

Over the years, I witnessed or heard about various other paratheatrical lab participants occasionally experiencing the intense cathartic reactions that come with the release of character armor—the spasms, emotional discharges, and waves of liberated energy. The consistent ability to instantly manifest such phenomena at will just by dropping into no-form, however, as described in the preceding

paragraph, is something that to the best of my present knowledge none of my fellow paratheatrical lab participants ever developed—something apparently rare enough that I haven't seen it discussed in any literature on somatic work or transpersonal experience, though I expect there are advanced practitioners of certain forms of yoga other transformative disciplines who can do the same sort of thing. I am convinced that my development of this ability had its origins in my unusual degree of affinity for no-form—an affinity which, as previously noted, I believe can be chalked up to the particular nature and qualities of autistic consciousness.

I'd been doing the paratheatrical work for about three years when I first began experiencing these deep releases of armor and intense energetic streamings during the rituals, although it took about five more years after that before I could consistently induce them just by dropping into no-form. It was somewhere around this three-year point, just after the waves of convulsive release and energetic streaming had reached a kundalini-awakening level of intensity, that my natural autistic stimminess, repressed since childhood, began to resurface here and there in small ways. I would find myself running my hand repeatedly over a pleasingly textured surface, or gently rocking back and forth to some inner rhythm as I sat; my arms would rise to hover in the air in front of me as I spoke, fingers twisting and dancing. Gradually and subtly, over the next few years, these spontaneous organismic impulses to stim increased.

In those first few years, I didn't yet understand what was happening; this was before I'd ever even heard the term stimming. I simply observed the

increasing emergence of these interesting ways of moving, and of impulses to immerse myself in specific embodied engagements with specific sensations. Since the movements that were emerging seemed like less intense and dramatic versions of some of the movements that had emerged in my embodiment during paratheatrical rituals, it was clear to me that whatever was happening was part of how the paratheatrical work was transforming me. Given that the whole point of engaging in a transformative practice is to be transformed by it, I decided to embrace what was happening and go with it. “Buy the ticket, take the ride,” as the saying goes. So I let the movements happen—and when I did, it just felt right, felt good and natural and somehow familiar, even if I couldn’t yet put my finger on why.

It was in 2002—when I was heading from my early 30s into my middle 30s and had been a core member of ParaTheatrical ReSearch for almost six years—that I first began getting involved in online autistic communities, where I finally encountered the term *stimming* and started learning about what it was and about other autistics’ experiences of it. Then the pieces finally started falling into place and I got the first inklings of an understanding of how it all fit together—how the strange spontaneous movement impulses I’d been experiencing were *stimming* impulses, natural manifestations of autistic embodiment, which had long been blocked by character armor until my participation in the paratheatrical work had started to break down that armor and re-attune me to what Grand (1978) called “the inner thrust and rhythms of [my] own organism” (p. 40).

Recovering Myself

In one of the earliest scholarly arguments against subjecting autistic children to programs of behaviorist “treatment” or “therapy” aimed at training them to suppress stimming and other outward expressions and qualities of autistic embodiment in the interest of conformity to hegemonic neurotypical norms, autistic researcher Michelle Dawson (2004) pointed out that “no researcher knows or even has studied the extent to which ‘inappropriate’ autistic behaviours are entangled with, and therefore contributors to, exceptional autistic abilities” (para. 75). In my own experience, stimming and other distinctive manifestations of autistic embodiment have proven to be inextricably entwined not only with exceptional autistic abilities, but also with basic autistic psychological resilience and wellbeing, autistic cognitive functioning, and autistic capacities for creativity, happiness, healthy interpersonal connection, and self-actualization.

The gradual recovery of the stimmy autistic dance of my True Self through the paratheatrical work began to have a positive effect on my psychological wellbeing, and my cognitive and creative capacities, even before I was aware that that was what was happening. In 2002, a few months before I started getting involved with online autistic communities, I spontaneously started writing and creating visual art, after having been able to produce almost no creative work since high school. And then, later that year, I managed to enroll myself in the local community college, fill out the necessary financial aid forms, and register for a couple of art and design courses. Dealing with the details of a plan to improve my life like that, and following through with it all, without

succumbing to anxiety, confusion, overwhelm, and panic, had never been possible for me before. Now it was suddenly easy, though I still didn't understand why.

I took the courses I'd registered for, enjoyed them, and did well in them. I registered for more courses the following semester, the spring of 2003. This time, in addition to art classes, I took an English class. I was nervous about the English class. Art was the one subject at which I'd done well in my youth, so I'd figured it was a reasonably safe bet that I'd be able to handle college art courses. But I'd never been able to write a paper before, except for a few brief attempts I'd managed to painstakingly sweat my way through in high school that had been barely acceptable enough to enable me to pass my classes. I only attempted a college English class at all because even a degree in digital art included basic English, math, and science requirements. Much to my surprise, I did so well in the English class that the professor pulled me aside at the end of the term to tell me what a pleasure it had been to have me in the class and to urge me to continue my academic education beyond community college. This success emboldened me, and I began trying courses in a wider range of subjects. I did well in all of them—so well that it became a consistent pattern for instructors to urge me at the end of each term to go into whatever field it was that they were teaching. Meanwhile, as I continued to do the paratheatrical work, my mind felt ever-clearer. After a few semesters of this, it occurred to me that not only could I go on to a bachelor's degree and then a graduate degree, I could also major in anything I wanted to. My experiences with aikido and ParaTheatrical ReSearch had led me to develop a

strong interest in somatic psychology, so I set my sights on the Somatic Psychology program at California Institute of Integral Studies.

The improvements in my psychological wellbeing were more difficult to track, and less of a steady upward progression, in the early years of this transformative process. For one thing, the outward circumstances of my life were still highly stressful; I still lived in poverty, eking out a precarious living at unpleasant and underpaid jobs, bouncing from one unstable shared housing situation to the next as I tried to keep a roof over my head. The emotional stress of my external circumstances made it difficult to recognize at first that I wasn't in a chronic state of depression anymore. It was sometime around 2003 when I started to notice that in those periods of respite in which there were no active crises or immediate stressors affecting me, I was sometimes feeling pretty good. Another factor that made the improvements in my psychological wellbeing less evident at first was that, as Reich and his successors in the field of somatic psychology noted, a person's history of trauma and emotional pain is "bound into their armor" (as cited in Büntig, 2015, p. 58), and the de-arming process initially tends to bring to the surface all the feelings that were bound into or locked up behind whatever layers of armor are being released (Büntig, 2015; Grand, 1998; E. W. L. Smith, 1985). So my chronic depression was supplanted, at first, not by a consistently better emotional state, but by an increase in anger and emotional volatility. It wasn't until 2003, about seven years into my work with ParaTheatrical ReSearch, that my ability to integrate the emotional material I was releasing through my de-arming process was sufficiently well-developed that I

started to find myself in a good emotional state on a fairly consistent basis. I imagine I could have navigated the emotional aspects of my transformative process far better if I'd understood at the time what was going on—but at that point, I still didn't.

The big breakthrough came when I began my graduate studies in somatic psychology at California Institute of Integral Studies and was exposed to the works of Winnicott (1958/1992, 1965, 1971/2005) and Reich (1933/1972). Up to that point, the gradual recovery of my capacity to embody my autistic True Self as a result of the paratheatrical work, and the consequent improvements in my psychological wellbeing and cognitive functioning, had been fortuitous but largely unplanned and haphazard; I'd recognized that the paratheatrical work had been playing a role in my ongoing emergence from my long-standing state of psychospiritual crisis, as I'd originally hoped it would, but I wasn't quite clear on the nature of that role or exactly how the positive transformations were being effected. By the spring of 2008, though (my second semester studying somatic psychology, and the semester I took my first course with Ian Grand), I finally had all the pieces of the puzzle: autistic embodiment, stimming, Winnicott's concepts of True Self and False Self, concepts of character armor and the somatic work of de-armorings—all the information I needed in order to arrive at the understanding of my experiences which I've articulated in the foregoing sections of this chapter.

Arriving at this understanding was a game-changer for me. Now that I had a sense of what had been happening to me, I was able to more intentionally direct my own transformative process. I started using the paratheatrical work to move

the process along in more specifically targeted ways—for instance, by invoking my True Self as a source. In my daily life, outside of the paratheatrical ritual sessions, I began experimenting with intentionally training myself to a new sort of deep somatic mindfulness in which I learned to notice and tune in to the impulses, desires, rhythms, stirrings, and promptings of my organismic self, and to be as spontaneously responsive as possible in letting them guide and shape my embodiment, my movements, and my relationship to the sensory world (e.g., choices regarding which sensations to seek out, avoid, indulge in, focus on, or engage with via stimulating). These inner impulses and promptings were often difficult to sense and tune into at first, but the somatic awareness I'd cultivated through years of aikido training and paratheatrical work helped a great deal. As time went on, I got progressively better at this attunement to my organismic self, and at allowing my embodiment, movements, actions, and interactions to be shaped spontaneously by its promptings without having to give it conscious thought. In other words, I gradually retrained my embodiment so that instead of the False Self I'd learned to habitually embody for the sake of survival, it became more and more natural and habitual for me to embody my True Self.

This intentional retraining of my embodiment was a long, slow process; to some degree it's something I'm still always working at, though at this point I've come quite far. At first, for a few years, the process was somewhat messy. For one thing, despite the progress I'd made in de-armorng, I still had some deeply ingrained character armor holding back the new (or very old and long-lost) self-embodiments that were attempting to emerge. As I became aware of this armor, I

was able to break it down and discharge it through the use of the paratheatrical techniques and through other somatic de-armorings I picked up in my studies. But the conflicts between the residual armor and the emergent embodiments would often initially manifest as acute physical or emotional symptoms—tension headaches, back pain, mood swings—until I could locate the armor and discharge it. There also were some interesting and sometimes adverse social consequences to the dramatic increase in highly visible stimming. But now, unlike in my childhood, I was prepared to navigate those social consequences: no one was going to bully a full-grown, physically confident martial arts instructor; and as a full-time graduate student and mostly stay-at-home parent living on financial aid, I wasn't trying to hold any job except my part-time aikido teaching (and teaching aikido, like being a professional musician, is one of those occupations in which a certain amount of visible eccentricity seems to be tolerated or even expected by the clientele). In any event, the long-term results of this extended project of somatic self-transformation were more than worth the difficulties.

The results, in fact, eventually came to exceed my highest expectations. Over the course of a decade, all the issues that had been part of my long state of psychospiritual crisis largely resolved themselves. The persistent feelings of futility, alienation, anxiety, depression, and loss all slowly faded away; my baseline emotional state gradually became one of happy serenity. My cognitive capacities further improved, enabling me to engage in writing and scholarship at levels that would have been impossible for me when I was 30, and opening the

door to an academic teaching career. My creativity blossomed, and I began writing fiction for publication. I had more energy to live my life and to follow through on plans and projects—partly because I was happier and more enthusiastic about what I was doing in my life, but also because “[t]he chronic tension of muscular armoring requires a constant energy supply” (E. W. L. Smith, 1985, p. 44) and thus, the more character armor one releases, the more energy one has available for better things.

I had felt for so long that there was something missing in every aspect of my life, that I was missing some crucial piece. It turned out that what was missing from my life was me: the embodied dance of my authentic autistic self, which I’d long ago lost and had now regained. How can one make true and authentic connection while trapped behind the armored mask of a False Self? In order to make true connections—with the world, with others, with life, with one’s own creativity, vitality, and joy—it’s essential to actually be there to connect, to be fully present and embodied as one’s True Self. And this certainly applies when it comes to forming and maintaining genuine close connections with others. Real, sustained, healthy intimacy now became possible for me for the first time, and my loneliness, like my sense of alienation, was gone at last. Soon I was married to the love of my life—a partnership which, in addition to bringing us more and more happiness as time goes on, and creating a stable home environment for my daughter, also finally enabled me to cocreate the aikido dojo I’d always dreamed of (no matter how much my cognitive abilities improved, I never quite had the

precise sort of organizational skills needed to manage the logistics of a small business—but I had the good fortune to marry someone who does).

As I note above, there were some social consequences to ceasing to suppress my natural autistic embodiment and allowing myself to stim in highly visible ways; many neurotypicals react poorly to that sort of thing, which of course is a big part of why autistics have such a hard time in the neurotypical social world and get pushed into suppressing the embodiment of their True Selves. I had some concern that this could become a substantial problem for me once I finished grad school and needed to start making good impressions on prospective employers and landlords and such. Nevertheless, I persisted—and over time, as I continued to progress in the ongoing practice of bringing the shimmering geometries of my autistic self more fully into embodiment, I underwent another unexpected transformation.

As my embodiment became less and less armored, and more and more deeply receptive and fluidly responsive to the organismic swirlings, rhythms, and promptings of my True Self, it was as if the entirety of my embodiment, the whole way I moved and interacted with the world, gradually became one perpetual intricate dance of stimming. The further my embodiment evolved in this direction, the less I found myself moved to stim in ways that were pronounced enough to draw a lot of attention. I wasn't suppressing anything, wasn't altering my embodiment or toning down my stimming for the sake of conformity and acceptance; I had sworn off that sort of thing. My stimming just naturally became more subtle as it became more integrated into every aspect of my embodiment.

My bodymind had less use for the sort of dramatically pronounced stims stereotypically associated with autistic bodily movement (e.g., rapid hand-flapping), because the various needs that stimming meets for autistics—processing, integration, regulation, release, access to cognitive capacities, sensory engagement and exploration, pleasure, vertical communion, and so on—were being constantly satisfied through the fluid, subtle, continuous stimming that had become an integral part of my ever-shifting, moment-to-moment, organismic dance of self-shaping.

The dance of my embodiment remains a distinctive and eccentric bodily enactment of my True Self. Fellow autistics with an eye for such things readily recognize me as one of their own, but the non-autistic rarely spot me as autistic unless they know in advance to look for it. People tend to respond to me well; they may note and wonder at the eccentricity of my movements, but they respond more, on an instinctive level, to the sense of physical confidence, presence, and ease that comes from the combination of authentic true-self-embodiment, de-arming, and decades of aikido practice.

In terms of how my day-to-day lived bodily experience has been changed as a result of my work on liberating and embodying the dance of my True Self, the sense of ease I've found is perhaps what stands out the most. I'd learned in my aikido training how to use my body with a certain degree of fluid ease—and yet, that was different from truly feeling at ease in myself, at ease and at home in my embodiment and in my engagement with the world. To find that ease of presence, to transform my life into an easy embodied dance of joyfully fluid creative

engagement with self and others and the world, required the combination of the structured bodily training I found in aikido and the somatic excavation and integration of the True Self that I undertook using the working methods of ParaTheatrical ReSearch.

Standing on the Floating Bridge of Heaven

My aikido practice, too, was transformed and uplifted by my recovery of the dance of my True Self. Aikido had done wonders for me over the years. I had come into my aikido training physically weak and clumsy; it had enabled me to become strong and agile. I had come in warped and shrunken by trauma, hunched and twisted and pulled-inward; it had enabled me to grow into an embodiment that was calm, poised, confident, well-aligned, and expansive. I had come in frequently overloaded by the blooming, buzzing confusion of my sensory experience; it had enabled me to navigate the sensory field in a centered, grounded, and mindful way that prevented overload while still allowing me to enjoy the benefits of autistic perception and the pleasurable aspects of sensory intensity. My practice had been a consistent source of stability, pleasure, positivity, and growth throughout my life, and my lifelong commitment to it had enabled me to realize potentials far beyond what anyone—myself included—would ever have expected I had in me back when I first started training.

And yet, as I note back in the opening section of this chapter, a dissatisfaction with my aikido practice had gradually arisen in me during those years in my late 20s when my state of psychospiritual crisis was at its worst—a dissatisfaction born of a growing awareness that there were levels of grace, joy,

flow, and connection possible in aikido which I saw in highly advanced teachers and yearned to experience myself, but which continued to elude me no matter how long and diligently I trained.

The de-arming I did in the first several years of my work with ParaTheatrical ReSearch certainly helped. Relaxation is essential to good aikido—essential to the flow, harmony, and sensitive attunement that the art requires and aims to cultivate (Leonard, 1999)—so naturally, the progressive relaxation of deeper levels of chronic tension did bring about significant advances in my practice. Nonetheless, something was still missing.

What was missing from my aikido, of course, was the same thing that had been missing from every other aspect of my life for so long: me, the dance of my autistic True Self. Aikido, after all, is ultimately about not only harmony but connection (Holiday, 2013; Leonard, 1999)—simultaneous connection with others, with one’s own felt embodiment, and with the vertical sources that O-Sensei spoke of as the *ki* of the universe or the *kami* (Holiday, 2013; Saotome, 1993). And, as Winnicott (1965) observed, it’s only the True Self that can make and sustain connections of real integrity and depth.

Over the years, I’d been blessed with the opportunity to learn from many excellent aikido teachers. Like most advanced practitioners, my way of performing the movements and techniques of aikido had been developed through a process in which I initially worked at mimicking and experimenting with the movements and techniques of my various teachers, then gradually integrated those movements and techniques into my own synthesis of what I’d learned, then

continued to refine that synthesis based on my experiences in practice. I'd developed very good form in this way; I performed aikido skillfully and moved well both on and off the mat. All of it, however, was rooted in imitation of the embodiments of my teachers, and none of my aikido teachers had been autistic. I had learned to move and carry myself like a highly skilled aikidoka, but like a non-autistic aikidoka. And thus the aikido I was practicing, however skillful, was necessarily limited in its grace, connectedness, and beauty by the fact that it wasn't a fully authentic expression of my True Self—which was and is, after all, an autistic self.

I didn't understand this until my graduate studies in somatic psychology inspired me to begin the project of intentionally recovering and embodying the dance of my True Self. Once I'd embarked upon that project, it wasn't too long before I recognized that it had to extend to my aikido practice. For my aikido to have the deep quality of harmonious connectedness I sought, it had to be in harmony with my own autistic nature and connected to the vital wellspring of my own autistic organismic swirlings. What I needed to do in order to bring my aikido to the levels I'd been seeking, to begin to truly realize my potentials as an aikidoka, was the same thing that I needed to do to improve the rest of my life: practice becoming so responsive to the promptings of my autistic True Self that my embodiment became a continuous, fluid, self-shaping dance of stimming.

In 2012, when I was a few years into working on this project of recovering my True Self's dance of stimming and had made substantial progress, journalist Steve Silberman (2015) visited my dojo and watched one of my aikido classes as

part of the research process for *NeuroTribes*, his weighty tome on the history of autism. After class was over, Silberman—who had been spending a lot of time around a lot of autistic folks—said to me, “I think the way you do aikido has got to be the most sophisticated form of stimming I’ve ever seen.”

I thanked him and commended him on his perceptiveness. “Exactly what I’ve been going for,” I said.

In addition to learning to let the organismic dance of stimming shape my embodiment, there was another piece I found around the same time that helped me to find the depth and grace I’d been yearning for in my aikido practice. O-Sensei, the founder of aikido, was a devout Shintoist who was prone to speaking of aikido in the language of Shinto mysticism. Many years later, his onetime student Motomichi Anno Sensei recalled:

O-Sensei didn’t talk about things like footwork, or how to use your strength, or how to relax. When O-Sensei taught about technique, he would talk about *kami*. He conveyed the most important points of the techniques in that way. Before O-Sensei led us in the purification practice ... at the beginning of class, he would say, “First, you must stand on the Floating Bridge of Heaven [*Ame no uki hashi*].” I wasn’t sure what he meant, and like the others around me I was impatient to train. Looking back on it ... I understand what O-Sensei said about standing on *Ame no uki hashi* to mean that we must begin in a natural state of mind, a fluid state of mind that is not fixed in one place. Stand naturally, with your mind on the Floating Bridge of Heaven: a clear, egoless state of mind. (as quoted in Holiday, 2013, pp. 102–103)

Not long after I began the project of recovering the dance of True Self, I attended an aikido seminar taught by Anno Sensei on one of his rare visits to the United States. At that time, he had been a dedicated aikido practitioner for more than half a century. I had seen a few other highly advanced teachers who had been training that long and who, like Anno Sensei, had trained directly with O-Sensei

in their youth. Anno Sensei always stood out to me, though, even among those other extraordinary teachers, for the way he exemplified the beauty, grace, and depth of connection I sought in my own practice, and for the humility and sincerity with which he continued to work at understanding O-Sensei's teachings.

At this particular seminar, Anno Sensei spoke (through a translator) of standing on the Floating Bridge of Heaven, and how only now, after so many years, he was finally beginning to understand what O-Sensei meant by that intriguing metaphor. As I listened, it suddenly came to me: he was talking about no-form. Watching his exquisite demonstrations of aikido *waza*, I could see it in him: the formless, living emptiness of embodied no-mind; the spacious receptivity that I knew so well from the paratheatrical work.

And so, as I worked to bring more of the dance of my True Self into my aikido, I also began working at finding and maintaining states of no-form in my aikido. Each of these two elements of my work served the other in a perfect synergy: the receptivity of no-form helped me to be ever more attuned and responsive to the swirlings and promptings of my organismic self, while the more I brought my organismic self's autistic dance of stimming into embodiment the more access I had to the full benefits of autistic perception—including the natural aptitude for no-form which for me was intimately connected to the fundamental nature of autistic consciousness.

Over the course of the past decade, my focus on integrating these two elements into my aikido practice—no-form and the stimmy dance of my True Self—has yielded all the results I'd hoped for, and more. The deep levels of

harmony and connectedness that I'd yearned to tap into and which had long eluded me have now come to suffuse my practice, and I've found levels of grace and beauty and joy in aikido far beyond what I'd previously thought to be possible; I know now what it is to stand on the Floating Bridge of Heaven.

Aikido and the work of ParaTheatrical ReSearch, two vastly different forms of transformative somatic practice, have both been essential to the ongoing journey of self-transformation and self-actualization upon which I first embarked at the age of 12. What I have come to, through the combination of these two forms of practice, is perhaps best summed up by one more passage from the writing of Ian Grand (1978):

Working somatically comes to mean, then, not simply psychologisms or better psychological functioning, but a fundamental shift in the conduct and felt wellspring of one's existence. It is a liberation ... of organism, not a recapturing of childhood but a standing toward future. It is not an acting out of emotion but an ongoing finding of what brings satisfaction. It is directed not to a goal of one kind of functioning but rather teaches persons to be with their own organismic process of forming.

What we come to, if we stand in unknowing, allowing the largeness we are to speak, if we create situations where we can discover qualities of presence in movement in interaction, if we can elucidate and follow the feelings and values that that emerge in our own flesh, is a daily process of creation. We create from our conflict and our exuberance, our passion and our solitude the meaning of our world. We ... become the ongoing enactment of the marvelous in the real. (pp. 42–43)

The shimmering geometry of ongoing self-creation that I embody in the world now emerges always from the organismic swirlings and stimmings of my autistic True Self—but is also shaped always by my past and current participation in transformative somatic practices. And my participation in these practices, at the same time, has been shaped by the autistic nature of my bodymind, by my distinctively autistic modes of perception and cognition—by my natural comfort

with asociality, for instance, or my talent for perceiving certain details and patterns of movement, or my affinity for no-form.

The transformative practices in which I have engaged have enabled me—and continue to enable me—to realize potentials for wellbeing and creative self-actualization far beyond what I or anyone else would have imagined possible for me in my youth, and far beyond what present mainstream discourses on autism envisage as possible for any autistic person. To thrive as I have, such discourses would lead one to believe, an autistic person would first somehow have to cease being autistic. And yet it was only through fully embracing and embodying my autistic nature that I was able to truly begin to access my higher potentials for psychospiritual wellbeing and the higher potentials of my aikido practice.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

As noted in Chapter 3, the goals, epistemological foundations, and validity criteria of autoethnographic inquiry “differ from those of traditional social science” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 963). Rather than building toward any particular conclusion, theory, claim of truth, or central argument, autoethnographic inquiry aims—through practices of self-revelation, evocative storytelling, and honest reflexivity—to foster reflection, awareness, insight, and understanding in the reader, and to inspire transformative action and further inquiry (Denzin, 2014; Ellis, 1999, 2004, 2009; Ellis et al., 2011; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005; Sparkes, 2002). Having done what I can to present an honestly self-revealing and reflexive narrative, I can only hope I’ve succeeded in the aim of evoking reflection and understanding. In this chapter, I reflect further upon a few central premises of my inquiry that seem to me to merit particular consideration. The later sections of the chapter focus on what I regard as the most important potentials of my narrative, the potentials to inspire transformative action and further inquiry; in these sections I discuss some of the narrative’s possible implications for praxis and research.

A Radical Paradigm Shift

Autism was first recognized, named, and described by professionals who were studying autistic children through the disciplinary lens of mid-20th century psychiatric medicine with the specific intent of understanding what was “wrong” with them (Silberman, 2015). The discourse on autism was thus entirely constructed, from its very inception, upon the unquestioned assumptions that

dominant neurotypical norms of cognition, embodiment, behavior, and experience represented the natural default and the only “right” or “healthy” modes of cognition, embodiment, behavior, and experience; and that autistic divergence from those norms must therefore represent some form of pathology, some manner of disorder which called for treatment—with the goal of treatment being to bring the “afflicted,” as much as possible, into compliance with neurotypical standards of normativity. In an essay originally published in 2012, I delineated this set of underlying assumptions that governed the discourse, and began referring to them as the pathology paradigm (Walker, 2012b).

Disciplinary discourses on autism, and the theories and praxis they produce—regardless of their many superficial differences—have continued to unfold within, and to be shaped by, the framework of the pathology paradigm and its fundamental assumptions (Walker, 2016; Yergeau, 2018). Within these discourses, for instance, various differences arise regarding the nature, etiology, or proper treatment of “Autism Spectrum Disorder,” but never over the legitimacy, purposes, or impacts of presuming autism to be a disorder or medicalized “condition” in the first place, or the potential implications, possibilities, and benefits of not presuming it to be a disorder.

The only significant challenge to the dominance of the pathology paradigm has been the small but growing body of recent work situated within the emergent neurodiversity paradigm (e.g., Armstrong, 2010, 2012; Bakan, 2018; Cowen, 2009; Danforth et al., 2018; Herrera & Perry, 2013; Hillary & Harvey, 2018; S. R. Jones, 2016; Manning, 2013; Manning & Massumi, 2014; Monje,

2015, 2016b; Mooney, 2013; Price, 2011; Savarese, 2010, 2014, 2018; Silberman, 2015; Walker, 2014, 2018; Yergeau, 2015, 2018). The neurodiversity paradigm represents a radical departure from the pathology paradigm in terms of fundamental assumptions. As the term neurodiversity implies, the neurodiversity paradigm frames neurocognitive variance in terms of human diversity without the presumption that deviation from dominant norms is intrinsically pathological. After all, most rational human beings these days don't approach ethnic diversity, for instance, from the assumption that the norms that one particular ethnic majority group represents is the one and only natural default way of being human, or that the divergences of ethnic minority groups from the norms of the ethnic majority are best explained in terms of deficit or medical pathology. When one takes a step back from the pathology paradigm and starts to question its underlying assumptions, those assumptions reveal themselves to be of dubious validity, to say the least—absurd relics of the sort of thinking that dominated the field of psychology back when the discourse on autism began in the early 1940s, embarrassingly archaic and hidebound when held up to the light of more progressive modern understandings of human diversity.

The shift from the pathology paradigm to the neurodiversity paradigm is a radical one, but not in the sense that the perspective offered by the neurodiversity paradigm is particularly extreme; indeed, I would argue that it's the pathology paradigm that's extreme, inasmuch as any ideology that views one specific group of humans as naturally superior and seeks to eliminate divergences from the norms of that group is inherently an extremist ideology, no matter how widely it

comes to be accepted and normalized within a given society in a given era. When I speak of a radical paradigm shift, I mean that to engage with human neurocognitive variance as another form of human diversity, and to approach that diversity without the distorting lens of the pathology paradigm's dubious and archaic assumptions, invites a complete re-visioning of current discourses, ideas, and praxis around autism, from the roots on up.

To call into question the fundamental assumptions of a paradigm is also to call into question the systems of praxis that are based in that paradigm. Praxis based in the pathology paradigm is inevitably limited by the pathology paradigm's values and assumptions, because those values and assumptions implicitly limit the goals of praxis. In other words, because the pathology paradigm holds dominant neurotypical standards of normativity as the "healthy" ideal, and frames autistic divergence from those standards as pathological, the only forms of praxis that can emerge within the pathology paradigm—and thus within any of the currently dominant discourses on autism—are forms of praxis aimed at reducing or eliminating autistic divergences from normativity.

Autistic people, however, can only truly thrive *as* autistic people, not as imitation neurotypicals, and praxis aimed at trying to make autistic people "less autistic"—that is, more in compliance with neurotypical norms—serves autistic wellbeing about as well as the wellbeing of a cat might be served by trying to force it to act like a duck. In the words of one parent who eventually came to recognize that professional praxis based in the pathology paradigm was doing his autistic child more harm than good: "Autists are the ultimate square pegs, and the

problem with pounding a square peg into a round hole is not that the hammering is hard work. It's that you are destroying the peg" (P. Collins, 2004, p. 225).

My own path to a life characterized by a general state of wellbeing involved forms of transformative somatic praxis (e.g., aikido and the working methods of ParaTheatrical ReSearch) that weren't shaped by the pathology paradigm because they weren't developed with autistic people in mind, but rather with the intent of facilitating the psychospiritual growth of humans in general. In the end, in fact, my attainment of happiness, health, and wellbeing required an active rejection of the pathology paradigm's compulsory normativity, and an active campaign of purging the internalized effects of that normativity from my embodiment. In exploring and recounting my journey in this dissertation, I mean to help point the way toward a radical re-visioning of the potentials for autistic wellbeing, and a radical re-visioning of how that wellbeing can be fostered when systems and goals of praxis are liberated from the pathology paradigm's intrinsic limitations.

The emergent neurodiversity paradigm represents a very real and viable alternative to the pathology paradigm's long, shameful, and still-ongoing history of oppressive discourse, bigotry masquerading as theory, and fundamentally unsound and abusive praxis. The neurodiversity paradigm has the potential to serve as a foundation for whole new realms of praxis that could serve to foster autistic wellbeing in myriad ways. A detailed discussion of the potentials—of the modes and systems of praxis that might eventually emerge, and what their results might be—would fall outside the scope of this present inquiry and would

constitute an entire dissertation in its own right, to say the least. And that work is being done elsewhere, and will continue to be done; several groundbreaking scholarly works on modes of praxis based in the neurodiversity paradigm, in such disparate realms as psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy (Danforth et al., 2018) and ethnomusicology (Bakan, 2018), were published during the time I was writing this dissertation, and I know of more that are presently in the works, including a substantial anthology on the future(s) of neurodiversity.

This present inquiry, however, is not about the neurodiversity paradigm or its overall potential future(s). My inquiry is simply grounded in the neurodiversity paradigm—insofar as it implicitly rejects the premises of the pathology paradigm and takes a nonpathologizing approach to autism that embraces the creative potentials of autistic bodyminds and their divergences from neurotypical norms—and discussion of the neurodiversity paradigm within these pages is here solely to provide whatever context might be necessary due to the neurodiversity paradigm being a new enough development in scholarly discourses that readers cannot be assumed to already be familiar with it.

Rather than making the neurodiversity paradigm as a whole its focus, this inquiry has focused upon one specific variety of praxis: the use of transformative somatic practices toward the cultivation of autistic psychospiritual wellbeing. This is a realm of praxis that is fundamentally incompatible with the pathology paradigm and fundamentally compatible with the neurodiversity paradigm. Thus, I hope and believe that this dissertation does serve to advance the emergent discourse of the neurodiversity paradigm, by serving as one clear example of the

possibilities for constructive praxis and neurodivergent thriving that a radical shift from the pathology paradigm to the neurodiversity paradigm has the potential to enable.

Self-Actualization and the Neurodiversity Paradigm

In reference to the systems of praxis generated within the pathology paradigm, Melanie Yergeau writes that “in concordance with these theories ... a series of rehabilitative enterprises have emerged, bearing the assumption that autism ... is potentially improvable” (Yergeau & Huebner, 2017, p. 281).

Yergeau, as an autistic scholar thoroughly aware of the harm these “rehabilitative enterprises” inflict upon her fellow autistics, is of course using the term “improvable” sarcastically here. In discourses on autism shaped by the pathology paradigm, neurotypical viewpoints are the only viewpoints recognized as valid—autistics are portrayed as incapable of having valid, accurate, or meaningful viewpoints, or sometimes as incapable of having viewpoints at all—and in the context of such discourses, to “improve” any autistic person inevitably means only one thing: to bring that person into closer compliance with neurotypical standards of normativity (Walker, 2016; Yergeau, 2018; Yergeau & Huebner, 2017).

Through the lens of the neurodiversity paradigm, on the other hand, compliance with neurotypical standards of normativity wouldn't be considered “improvement,” any more than scholars in the realm of queer theory would consider it “improvement” for queer people to suppress their sexualities and gender expressions in order to comply with the demands of heteronormativity. In

the discourse of the neurodiversity paradigm, the idea of “improvement” as a goal of praxis might perhaps best be taken to mean improvement in wellbeing and quality of life—quality of life, that is, as experienced by the person actually living the life in question, rather than quality of life as assessed from the outside according to normative neurotypical standards of what a good life “should” look like.

There are many different facets to life, of course, which could be the focus of forms of praxis that aim at improving quality of life. A significant portion of the small but steadily growing body of existing scholarly work based in the neurodiversity paradigm, for instance, has thus far been oriented toward envisioning and promoting forms of praxis aimed at accommodating the needs of autistic or otherwise neurodivergent people in order to better facilitate their autonomy and their inclusion and participation in such social realms as education, healthcare, employment, and the arts (e.g., Armstrong, 2010, 2012; Bakan, 2018; Hillary & Harvey, 2018; S. R. Jones, 2016; Mooney, 2013; Nicolaidis, Kripke, & Raymaker, 2014; Price, 2011; Savarese, 2010, 2014, 2018; Silberman, 2015; Walker, 2018). I’m glad such work is being done; accommodation and inclusion are indeed essential to autistic wellbeing and quality of life. My own interests, however, lie elsewhere, in the realms of somatic psychology, humanistic psychology, transpersonal psychology, and transformative practice. As has no doubt become obvious in the preceding chapters of this dissertation, the particular aspect of wellbeing in which I’m most interested and upon which my work is focused is psychospiritual wellbeing—specifically, the cultivation of

psychospiritual wellbeing through processes of self-actualization facilitated by transformative practice.

Like various esteemed colleagues who are also working to foster a shift toward the neurodiversity paradigm in autism-related discourse (e.g., Bakan, 2018; Danforth et al., 2018; Hillary & Harvey, 2018; S. R. Jones, 2016; Manning, 2013; Savarese, 2010, 2014, 2018; Yergeau, 2013, 2015, 2018; Yergeau & Huebner, 2017), I reject the fundamental premise behind the systems of praxis generated by the pathology paradigm, the premise that autism is “improvable”—in other words, that an autistic person can be or would be “improved” by being somehow brought into closer compliance with neurotypical norms. What I do believe, however, is that the human psychospiritual condition is improvable, by means of dedicated participation in transformative practice. This is a belief grounded in a lifetime of direct observation and experience—including the experiences examined in Chapters 4 and 5 of this dissertation—and represents a fundamental premise of this dissertation and of all my work. For purposes of this dissertation, I’ve used the term self-actualization—a term drawn from the field of humanistic psychology (Maslow, 1968; Metzner, 1998; Rowan & Glouberman, 2018)—to refer to processes of psychospiritual development and cultivation of positive psychospiritual potentials (e.g., potentials for wellbeing, happiness, creativity, inner peace and stability, healthy intimacy, compassion, connection, spontaneity, authenticity, joy, wisdom, ego transcendence, and peak experience).

In the section of Chapter 2 entitled “Humanistic Psychology Versus the Pathology Paradigm,” I discuss the humanistic orientation’s fundamental

incompatibility with the pathology paradigm, and how the history of the pathology paradigm's dominance of autism-related discourses has effectively left no real opening in those discourses for humanistic approaches. Self-actualization, as conceptualized in humanistic psychology, involves the discovery, embrace, and authentic expression of the unique individual creative potentials of the "real self" (Rowan & Glouberman, 2018)—or what Winnicott (1965), not technically a humanistic psychologist but certainly among the more humanistically inclined of the major psychodynamic thinkers, referred to as the True Self . Humanistic psychology in general—and the goal of self-actualization in particular—is thus fundamentally at odds with the agenda of compulsory normativity, conformity, and compliance that characterizes the pathology paradigm.

The emergence of the neurodiversity paradigm opens the way for humanistic psychology, and its offshoots positive psychology and transpersonal psychology, to finally play a significant role in the discourse on autism and the furtherance of autistic wellbeing. Unlike the pathology paradigm, the neurodiversity paradigm—with its emphasis on embracing and supporting each person's unique individuality and the creative potentials inherent in that individuality—is entirely compatible with the principles and priorities of humanistic psychology and with a focus on autistic self-actualization. I believe such a focus will constitute an invaluable addition to the emergent discourse and praxis of the neurodiversity paradigm.

In arguing that a focus on self-actualization through transformative practice can serve to foster autistic wellbeing where the praxis of the pathology

paradigm has consistently failed to do so, this dissertation takes a position in alignment with the neurodiversity paradigm, with humanistic priorities, and with Winnicott's (1971/2005) position "that living creatively is a healthy state, and that compliance is a sick basis for life" (p. 88).

Foregrounding Autistic Experience

The task of radically reshaping of discourses and systems of praxis toward the aim of actually serving the wellbeing of autistic people will require the foregrounding of autistic voices and autistic experience. This necessity becomes immediately obvious once one steps away from the distorting lens of the pathology paradigm and considers the matter in terms of the dynamics of human diversity and social power: how well have the members of any minority group ever fared when their own voices and perspectives haven't had primacy in shaping the dominant discourses and systems of praxis pertaining to their lives, and when those discourses and systems of praxis have instead been shaped by members of a dominant group that has a vested interest in maintaining dominance and that has repeatedly proven unwilling to treat members of the minority in question as equals or as having valid perspectives? How have women traditionally fared, for instance, where discourse, policy, and praxis pertaining to their lives, bodies, and wellbeing have been shaped entirely by men?

As I discuss in the section of Chapter 3 entitled "The Importance of Autoethnography in Autism Research," the growing genre of autistic autoethnography stands to play a vitally important role not only in bringing autistic voices and lived experiences into the discourse in a direct way, but also in

countering the pathology paradigm discourses that frame autistics exclusively as objects rather than subjects and portray us as “arhetorical and tragically inhuman” (Yergeau, 2018, p. 23) and “lack[ing] introspective abilities” (Yergeau & Huebner, 2017, p. 278).

An essential function of autoethnographic narratives is to help readers to understand and “communicate with others different from themselves” (Ellis, 1999, p. 674), to “encourage acts of witnessing, empathy, and connection that extend beyond the self” (Sparkes, 2002, p. 222). One reason autistic autoethnography is such a necessary addition to the discourse is that it’s difficult for non-autistic people to accurately imagine autistic experience. As I note parenthetically in the section of Chapter 4 entitled “The Aesthetics of Emergence,” autistic scholars like myself face a twofold challenge in describing our experiences in autoethnographic works: first, we must write in languages which were developed by and for non-autistic people with non-autistic perceptions, and which were thus not designed to describe autistic perceptual experience; and second, the task of explaining to non-autistic people how our experiences differ from their experiences is complicated by the fact that just as they haven’t experienced what it’s like to be autistic, we haven’t experienced what it’s like to be non-autistic, and it’s difficult to make a comparison between two states of being when one has only personally experienced one of those two states. Non-autistic authors writing about autistic experience, on the other hand, are spared from having to deal with these difficulties, as they have the luxury of simply remaining oblivious to any aspects or nuances of autistic experience that

fall outside the scope of what they can readily articulate or imagine. It's far easier and far more common for non-autistics to write inaccurately about autistic experience than to write accurately about it—and when first-hand autistic narratives are absent, ignored, or discounted, it's easy to get away with writing inaccurately about autistic experience and even to build a career on doing so. Social power, as the political scientist Karl Deutsch observed, is “the ability not to have to learn” (as quoted in Bateson, 1994, p. 75). A new discourse that foregrounds autistic narratives of autistic experience is essential to countering decades of entrenched misunderstanding based in the speculations and projections of non-autistic “expert authorities” whose failure to properly attend to autistic voices has led to severe deficits in their theory of autistic minds.

The inclusion of autistic voices and autistic narratives in the discourses on autistic lives and autistic wellbeing is essential, but not sufficient. When I speak of foregrounding autistic experience, I mean not only looking to first-hand autistic narratives of lived experience as the most valid and indispensable source of knowledge on autistic lives, but also looking to those narratives as a primary standard for assessing the validity of other sources of knowledge on the topic. In other words, if non-autistic “experts” are of the opinion that autistics lack theory of mind (to pick one example), and even if those “experts” have conducted studies that have been set up and interpreted in such a way as to appear to “prove” this opinion (which they have), the existence of first-hand autistic narratives that recount autistic experiences of exercising theory of mind should be considered sufficient evidence that the “autistics lack theory of mind” conjecture is false.

(Note that I selected the theory of mind canard as an example here partly for its humor value, because the existence of any coherent narratives written by autistics at all, regardless of their content, is proof that autistics possess theory of mind. It's only possible to compose a narrative that's coherent to others if one has the capacity to make reasonably sound assessments of what the members of one's intended audience are likely to already know and what they're likely to need to know.)

Another example of what I mean by foregrounding autistic experience can be seen in how I approach the topic of autistic neurobiology within this dissertation. As Melanie Yergeau (2018) has observed, the narratives of the pathology paradigm have come to focus heavily on neurobiology, “framing autism as a neurological involuntarity” (p. 8). The neuropsychological discourse on autism resembles a sort of modern-day phrenology, in which the distinctive characteristics allegedly possessed by autistic brains are seen as “explaining” whatever it is that a given group of non-autistic researchers believe about autistics—much as alleged differences between male and female brains are often used to “explain” that culturally imposed gender roles are biologically determined (Fine, 2010). Autistic neurobiology thus becomes a rhetorical prop, used to support whatever pathologizing narratives non-autistic “experts” care to spin about autistics. I've intentionally turned this around, using existing research and theory on autistic neurobiology as a rhetorical prop to embellish a narrative of autistic experience. Instead of “*x* is true of autistic brains, therefore *y* is true of autistics,” my position in this inquiry has been, “*x* is true of autistic experience,

and theory y about autistic brains might be valid insofar as it seems to be consistent with x.” Autistic experience, as reported and interpreted by the autistic who’s lived or is living that experience, remains primary. My decision to incorporate mentions of neurobiology into my inquiry in this way was inspired by a question posed by Yergeau (2018) in *Authoring Autism*: “[H]ow might an autistic rhetoric move beyond neurotypical obsession with the brain?” (p. 59); the answer I arrived at was that before moving beyond it, I wanted to try turning it to my own purposes, much as, in aikido practice, I might use an attacker’s determination to grab me as an asset that would help me take their balance.

The idea of foregrounding autistic experience also connects to my observation earlier in this chapter that in the discourse of the neurodiversity paradigm, to improve a neurodivergent person’s wellbeing would mean to improve it by that person’s own personal subjective standards rather than by neurotypical standards of what a person’s life ought to look like from the outside. In the section of Chapter 2 entitled “Humanistic Psychology Versus the Pathology Paradigm,” I discuss the history of the pathology paradigm’s dominance in autism-related discourse, and how this discourse was shaped to a large degree by the influence of groups of non-autistic parents of autistic children. The influence of non-autistic parents has supported the proliferation of lucrative forms of praxis that cater to the desire of these parents to have “normal” children—in other words, children who are outwardly compliant with neurotypical standards of normativity—usually at the expense of the actual wellbeing of the autistic children themselves (Asasumasu, 2013b; Bascom, 2012; Dawson, 2004;

Kupferstein, 2018; Silberman, 2015; Yergeau 2018). Intrinsic to the nature of the pathology paradigm is the tendency to treat the neurotypical viewpoint as the default (and often only) viewpoint; this tendency—like the pathology paradigm as a whole—is so deeply ingrained in the dominant neurotypical culture that it genuinely doesn't occur to most non-autistic people, until it's pointed out to them, that autistic wellbeing can often mean something very different from (and sometimes directly opposed to) “neurotypicals are pleased with the outcome.”

Such is the pervasiveness of the pathology paradigm and its tendency to elide autistic perspectives that even in enterprises that explicitly purport to focus on benefitting autistics—and by enterprises I mean anything from academic papers to organizations or conferences to workplace hiring initiatives—the focus tends to drift insidiously toward the agenda of benefitting neurotypicals. I mention in Chapter 2 that a small but growing trend toward increased attention to the potential benefits of autistic perception has emerged in recent years. The reason I've opted to mention this trend only in passing, rather than discussing it at any length, is that it turns out not to be particularly relevant to the topic of my inquiry. As Yergeau & Huebner (2017) note, nearly all work focused on the potential benefits of autistic perception is focused on how autistics and their perceptual and cognitive talents might potentially be exploited to financially benefit non-autistic business owners who employ autistic labor—or, at best, on how autistic perceptual and cognitive talents might benefit neurotypical-dominated society as a whole; “autism is rarely conceived as a causal of talent, unless that talent can be economically capitalized” (p. 281). The exploitation of autistic labor and autistic

talent is an entire separate dissertation topic in itself, which I hope someone else will write someday but which falls outside the scope of this present inquiry.

My own interest in the benefits of autistic perception and cognition, in the context of this inquiry, is specifically in the potential of the distinctive qualities of autistic perception and cognition to be of benefit to autistics themselves, on a psychospiritual level—the potential of these qualities to function as assets in the context of autistic journeys of self-actualization and autistic participation in transformative practices. The foregrounding of autistic experience means not only giving primacy to autistic voices, autistic perspectives, autistic narratives, and autistic ways of knowing, but also giving primacy to autistic wellbeing as a focus of praxis, and recognizing autistic wellbeing as an agenda distinct from—and not always necessarily in alignment with—neurotypical agendas for autistics.

During the time I was working on this dissertation, I read what's so far been my favorite book in the emerging genre of autistic speculative fiction (a genre which merits a dissertation of its own): the cyberpunk detective thriller *Hoshi and the Red City Circuit*, by my autistic friend and colleague Dora M. Raymaker (2018). *Hoshi and the Red City Circuit* envisions a dystopian future world dependent on advanced software technologies that only autistic minds can interface with well enough to program effectively, with the result that anyone diagnosed as autistic is forced into service as a computer programmer. In this future, society depends on autistic minds, but autistics remain despised and pathologized second-class citizens. The pathology paradigm still holds sway and the pathologization of autistics serves as both the means and justification for

keeping them oppressed and under rigorous governmental and corporate control; even as their cognitive divergences from the neurotypical are exploited for the benefit of neurotypical society, autistics are still subjected to “therapies” and other rehabilitative enterprises aimed at making them more compliant with the demands of neurotypical sociality. While *Hoshi and the Red City Circuit* is a wildly imaginative work of speculative fiction, it’s highly realistic in its portrayal of autistic experience and the social dynamics of the pathology paradigm and autistic-neurotypical relations, and also a highly realistic, I think, in its assessment of the probable results of a dominant discourse in which the strengths and positive potentials of autistic perception and cognition are valued primarily for their potential benefits to neurotypicals.

A future like that of *Hoshi and the Red City Circuit* (Raymaker, 2018), in which autistic potentials are harnessed for the benefit of a society in which autistics continue to be pathologized and downtrodden even as they’re valued for the ways in which they can be exploited, is not the future I want. The future on which I set my sights, and which I hope this dissertation might be of some small use in moving society toward, is a future in which lifelong voluntary participation in transformative somatic practices is a widespread part of autistic culture—not as part of any rehabilitative enterprise based in the pathology paradigm, but because both autistics and those non-autistics who support them have come to recognize and value the capacity of such practices to improve autistic lives by fostering self-actualization, grounded ways of dancing harmoniously with “the world in its morphability” (Manning, 2013, p. 219), and the deep experience of

psychospiritual wellbeing and serenity that comes from joyful and unfettered embodiment of the True Self in all its stimmy autistic glory.

Am I an Outlier?

As noted in Chapter 3, “usual understandings of validity are not applicable to autoethnographic work” (P. Smith, 2013, p. 25). Ultimately, that is, the goal of interpretive autoethnographic works such as this present inquiry is not to produce conclusive answers and claims to certainty, but to make a contribution to knowledge and understanding that moves others to constructive thought and dialogue, heightened awareness of possibilities, transformative action, and further inquiry.

Still, insofar as it’s a form of ethnographic research, autoethnography does also aim to “use personal experience to illustrate facets of cultural experience” (Ellis et al., 2011, para. 9), exploring the lived experience of the autoethnographer as a means of potentially sparking new understandings regarding a given “larger group or culture” (Ellis, 1999, p. 671) of which the autoethnographer is a member. And here, of course, one must contend with the inevitable limitation of autoethnographic inquiry: in focusing on only a single research subject—the autoethnographer—an autoethnographic study has a sample size of one, which is shaky ground when it comes to trying to make accurate generalizations about a larger group. Autistics are a wildly diverse bunch, after all, and there’s always the possibility that I’m not just unusual by neurotypical standards by virtue of being autistic, but also an outlier among autistics. This possibility is worth examining.

Am I an outlier? My own impression, based on many years of close involvement in autistic culture and communities and many years of conversing with fellow autistics and reading their writings, is that I'm an outlier among autistics only insofar as my decades-long immersion in transformative somatic practices has brought me, over time, to a point where my life and day-to-day experience are characterized by an overall condition of psychospiritual wellbeing—including a comfortable and joyful ease in my own bodymind, a general sense of serenity and inner peace, and a capacity for consistently comfortable and harmonious navigation of the sensory and social realms—to a degree that I've unfortunately observed to be quite rare among my fellow autistics in the modern world (and quite rare among non-autistics, too, for that matter).

In all other regards, I don't seem to be much of an outlier among autistics at all. My styles of sensory, perceptual, and cognitive functioning are consistent with modes of sensory, perceptual, and cognitive experience reported by many other autistics; as unusual as my sensory and perceptual experiences might sound to non-autistics who haven't encountered a great deal of first-hand reports of autistic experience by autistics other than myself, I seem to fall well within autistic norms, such as they are, when it comes to my innate perceptual and cognitive characteristics.

It's worth noting here, though, that the high level of synesthesia I experience (which has been an asset in some aspects of my aikido practice, as discussed in Chapter 4, but which also inconveniently prevents me from safely driving a car) seems to be more frequently characteristic of the sensory experience

of nonspeaking autistics (e.g., J. Jones & Yontz, 2015; Mukhopadhyay, 2003, 2008; Savarese, 2010, 2018; Sequenzia, 2015a, 2015b) than autistics who are capable of oral speech, although there are certainly exceptions other than myself (e.g., Prince-Hughes, 2013; Savarese, 2018; Tammet, 2007, 2009). It's also worth noting that my ability to speak wasn't consistent during my childhood; it came and went, fluctuating seemingly at random. (The adults around me, who were never paragons of attentive childcare, didn't even realize this. Because I could speak quite well some of the time, they assumed that when I wasn't speaking it must have been by choice; "refusing" to speak was one of the many spurious infractions for which I was regularly punished). My capacity for oral speech didn't become reliably constant until my early teens. Interestingly, my friend and colleague Dora M. Raymaker, another autistic who experiences high levels of synesthesia, also has a history of extreme fluctuations in her capacity for oral speech; in Dora's case, this has continued throughout adulthood (as cited in Savarese, 2018). In this regard, then, it could be argued that I am in some sense the opposite of an outlier: as a (currently) speaking autistic whose experience partakes to some degree of the experiential realms more characteristic of nonspeaking autistics, I seem to be situated in some sort of middle zone within whatever spectrum of autistic sensory and cognitive experience might be said to exist.

In fact, I seem to occupy non-outlier middle zones in regard to other aspects of autistic experience as well. My childhood experiences, from my earliest memories up until the time I began my aikido training, are highly typical of those

reported by numerous other autistics raised in North America, Western Europe, or Australia; the abuse, trauma, and struggles I've experienced are also highly typical of autistic lives in the modern world as reported by myriad autistics (e.g., Asasumasu, 2012, 2013a; Jackson, 2002; S. R. Jones, 2013, 2016; Kim, 2015; Prince-Hughes, 2004; Monje, 2012, 2016a). My early life was characterized by the same challenges that characterize the lives of the majority of autistics in the modern world: struggles with sensory sensitivity and overwhelm, dyspraxia, high levels of anxiety, depression, difficulty adjusting to change, constant difficulty in navigating the neurotypical social realm. I wasn't the most disadvantaged of young autistics—I didn't have to contend with the targeted violence by law enforcement that many of my Black autistic friends speak of encountering, for instance—but the poverty, parental negligence, and general lack of adult support that characterized my childhood meant that I didn't start out with any great advantage in life, either, compared to other light-skinned North American autistics.

The only ways in which I seem to be an outlier among autistics are the entirely positive ways in which I've become an outlier over time as a direct result of my long-term participation in transformative somatic practices. The abuse and trauma I experienced in childhood is fairly typical among autistics; what's atypical is how fully I've been able to recover from its effects, a recovery accomplished through the use of transformative somatic practices. All the challenges listed in the previous paragraph as typical of the early lives of autistics—overwhelm, dyspraxia, high anxiety, depression, social difficulties, and

so on—were pervasive in my own early life as well; what makes me an outlier is that now, in middle age, I no longer experience any of those issues at all, because I've been able to eliminate them through the use of transformative somatic practices.

So, again, I'd say that I'm not an outlier among autistics except in my extensive long-term participation in transformative somatic practices, and the positive effects this participation has had upon me over time. I'm an outlier among autistics only in the same sense that many of the neurotypicals I've known who've worked diligently at their training in aikido or some similarly transformative practice for four decades have become outliers among neurotypicals, in terms of the exceptional levels of self-actualization and psychospiritual wellbeing they've attained.

This is why I feel confident in asserting that the benefits I've derived from my own participation in transformative practices are available to any other autistic person—or any non-autistic person, for that matter—who puts a similar amount of time and commitment into such practices (and the capacity to put prodigious amounts of focus, time, and effort into their interests is a famously widespread trait among autistics). There are no reasonable grounds for supposing that my innate potentials for psychospiritual wellbeing differed substantially in any way from those of my fellow autistics; I've simply had the good fortune to stumble into a path that's enabled me to realize those potentials (or at least to begin to realize those potentials; self-actualization is an ongoing process rather than a prize to be attained, and the path of transformative practice is endless). Thus my hope

that this present dissertation will serve to inspire others to explore their own positive psychospiritual potentials through dedicated engagement in paths of transformative practice.

Implications for Praxis

The primary goal of this dissertation has always been to invite engagement with possibilities. In keeping with this intention, the remainder of this chapter is dedicated to considering some of the implications my autoethnographic narrative might hold for future praxis and research.

In my narrative, I examined my experiences as an autistic participant in transformative somatic practices, the ways in which the distinctive qualities of autistic consciousness and embodiment have manifested in the context of my engagement in those practices, and how those practices have served in my life as paths toward psychospiritual wellbeing and self-actualization. Based on this examination of my own experiences, in this section I offer some specific practical recommendations as to how transformative somatic practices might best be structured and employed in order to serve the goal of cultivating the wellbeing and positive potentials of autistic participants.

Autistic Self-actualization as a Goal

The primary intent of transformative practice is the transformation of consciousness toward the realization of positive human psychospiritual potentials—a process that I have referred to in this dissertation as self-actualization. In the discourse and praxis pertaining to the cultivation of human wellbeing, particularly in fields such as humanistic psychology and its offshoots

positive psychology and transpersonal psychology, the use of transformative practices toward goals of psychospiritual growth and self-actualization is a common theme.

In the academic and professional discourses and realms of praxis that focus specifically on attempting to address the needs and wellbeing of the autistic population, however, the idea of autistics actively working toward goals of transpersonal experience, psychospiritual growth, and self-actualization is conspicuously absent. Even when the participation of autistics in practices such as meditation, yoga, or martial arts is discussed in academic literature or facilitated in the context of professional praxis (e.g., as part of a program for autistic youth), there is no mention of the possibility of autistics engaging in these practices as paths of psychospiritual transformation and self-realization; instead, when the participants are autistic, the practices are stripped of this traditional central intent and bastardized to fit the agendas of “rehabilitative enterprises” (Yergeau & Huebner, 2017) that aim at getting autistics to conform to neurotypical behavioral norms. In considering my own experience, therefore, it seems particularly worth emphasizing the following points:

- first, I’m thriving to a degree far beyond what I or anyone else would have imagined possible for me in my youth, or what present mainstream discourses on autism commonly envisage as possible for autistics;
- second, my present condition of general wellbeing is not in any way the result of any “therapy,” “treatment,” or other rehabilitative

enterprise aimed at bringing me into closer alignment with neurotypical norms;

- third, my wellbeing is instead very much the result of my long-term participation in transformative practices specifically aimed at facilitating transpersonal experience, spiritual growth, and self-actualization in one way or another;
- fourth, my wellbeing is partly the result of the mitigation of the sort of challenges generally inherent to autistic experience (e.g., dyspraxia and sensory overwhelm) or to autistic experience in the modern world (e.g., chronic anxiety and social difficulties)—a mitigation that has not been the result of any treatment or therapy “for autism,” but rather a byproduct of my pursuit of transpersonal experience and self-actualization through commitment to transformative practices; and
- fifth, attempts to impose neurotypical norms of behavior upon my person (including the deliberate attempts made by adults in my childhood, the less formal attempts that simply consisted of others reacting with hostility to my divergence from such norms, and my own resulting internalization of those norms that began as an outward compliance to protect myself from abuse) ultimately proved to be among the greatest obstacles to my wellbeing and self-actualization, and I didn’t truly begin to thrive until I’d made substantial progress in using transformative practices to undo my internalized normativity on a deep bodily level.

In light of these points, it seems to me that the first and most fundamental lesson regarding praxis that might be derived from my narrative is simply that autistics who seek to cultivate their own wellbeing, and professionals who seek to be of genuine assistance in the enterprise of fostering and supporting the wellbeing of autistics, would do well to explicitly include psychospiritual growth and self-actualization among their long-term goals. An obvious second lesson is that consistent long-term engagement in one or more systems of transformative practice can serve as an effective path toward the realization of such goals, and, along the way, can serve as an effective means of addressing and mitigating many of the challenges faced by autistics.

Self-Actualization over Normativity

A third lesson that can be derived from the points summarized above is that the wellbeing of autistics might be better served not simply by aiming toward goals of long-term psychospiritual development and self-actualization, but by actively choosing to prioritize those goals over the imposition of neurotypical standards of normativity. It's worth reiterating here that the imposition of normativity can be outright harmful, and that at least in my case it proved to be in direct conflict with the path of wellbeing and self-actualization.

All of my experience and observation so far has led me to the conclusion that autistics can only truly thrive as autistics, not as imitations of neurotypicals. When I say that transformative practices can serve to mitigate certain challenges faced by autistics (e.g., dyspraxia, overwhelm, anxiety), this statement should in no way be construed as implying that transformative practices can (or should)

mitigate autism itself. The story of how I came to thrive, as recounted in the preceding chapters, is not at all a story of “overcoming autism” but rather a story of using transformative practices to realize the positive potentials of the autistic bodymind. It’s worth noting that transformative practices also serve to mitigate life challenges faced by neurotypicals, and yet one doesn’t tend to hear people say that advanced and self-actualizing practitioners have used the practices to “overcome their lack of autism.”

Inclusion

Anyone drawing upon my narrative for insight as to how transformative practices might be effectively employed as a means of fostering the wellbeing and empowerment of autistic youth would do well to take note of the fact that absolutely none of my aikido training has occurred in the context of any sort of special program or class designed specifically with autistics in mind. I began my aikido training in classes in which I was the only autistic participant; all of my training since then has occurred in settings that were not in any way designed for autistics, and in which either I was the only autistic or in which there were a few other autistics but we were still considerably in the minority.

I wouldn’t have had it any other way. From everything I’ve seen, programs of activity designed specially for autistics (at least when non-autistics have a hand in their design or implementation) seem to inevitably tend—whether overtly or covertly, and whether intentionally or not—toward the paternalistic, toward condescension and lowered expectations, and toward incorporating and insidiously prioritizing agendas of normativity. There has been no time in my life

at which I would have voluntarily subjected myself to the indignity of such a program; had I been forced to participate in one in my youth, my energies would have been focused entirely on resisting it and seeking to extricate myself. If my exposure to aikido had occurred in the context of such a program, instead of among non-autistic fellow students in a traditional dojo environment with the traditional goals, expectations, and pedagogy of aikido training, it's highly unlikely that I'd be thriving as I am today.

Nothing in my narrative, therefore, should in any way be construed as an endorsement of programs of transformative practice that are specifically designed for autistic participants, or that have agendas for autistic participants that differ in any way from the agendas for non-autistic participants. If my own experiences are an accurate indicator, better long-term life outcomes for autistics are more likely to result from voluntary autistic participation in existing systems and communities of transformative practice in which autistic participants are not treated differently from their non-autistic fellow practitioners.

Asociality

Transformative practice, by its very nature, is primarily asocial in intent, insofar as the orientation is toward relating to the vertical and insofar as this focus on the vertical, during sessions of practice, takes precedence over such conventional horizontal social priorities as “emotional support, ego status, courtship potential ... [or] socially ingrained obligations such as seeking or giving assurance [or] approval” (Alli, 2003, p. 4). One way in which asocial orientation is often maintained in settings and communities of transformative practice is

through clear formal structures and rules of conduct that mediate interpersonal interactions in order to keep those interactions from devolving into the sort of horizontal sociality that would constitute a distraction.

This asocial orientation and the structures and rules that support it have the secondary effect of serving as built-in social accommodations that help to facilitate accessibility for autistic participants. And because of this orientation, autistic asociality can often be an asset in the context of transformative practice. All of this constitutes not only a significant way in which existing traditions and communities of transformative practice are naturally equipped to support autistic thriving, but also yet another argument against attempting to graft agendas of social normativity or “social skills” training onto systems of transformative practice for the alleged “benefit” of autistic participants.

Those who have an interest in the question of how to help autistics learn to better navigate the neurotypical social world might do well to consider the fact that despite having had every bit as much social difficulty in childhood as any other autistic I know of, I currently navigate that world with a degree of skill, ease, pleasure, and success that is fairly rare among autistics—and that this is, as far as I can tell, entirely a result of the long-term engagement in transformative practices recounted in the preceding chapters. Although these practices had an asocial orientation, they enabled me to develop and bring into embodiment a combination of confidence, ease, relaxed expansiveness, comfort with myself, and mindful attunement to others, and this combination of embodied qualities has formed the basis for—and readily translated into—a comfortable and versatile

sociality far more natural and far more grounded in my authentic self than anything that would likely have resulted if I'd been subjected to one of those programs of “social skills” training designed for autistics by neurotypicals.

Dual Attention

For autistics, who so often struggle with how to stay actively engaged with the everyday world without being overwhelmed by its blooming, buzzing chaos and intensity, it can be particularly beneficial to engage in forms of transformative somatic practice that emphasize cultivating a centered, grounded, mindful embodiment and learning to maintain it while in interaction with one's surroundings and fellow practitioners. This cultivation of dual attention is addressed in the section of Chapter 4 entitled “Mindful Embodiment and Dual Attention.” Some of the better examples of such practices that I know of are the subset of martial arts that have a strong focus on the cultivation of centeredness and mindfulness and also involve interactive training with partners, such as aikido or certain styles of taiji and baguazhang.

De-Armoring

Most transformative somatic practices—from aikido to qigong to tantric sex to various forms of yoga—serve to facilitate some degree of de-armoring in one way or another (even though the process is only referred to as de-armoring or releasing character armor by those practitioners who are familiar with somatic psychology and the work of Wilhelm Reich (1933/1972)). The process of de-armoring has been an essential part of my path toward psychospiritual wellbeing and self-actualization, and is something I recommend as part of the cultivation of

autistic wellbeing (and human wellbeing in general). In making such a recommendation, I also recommend taking into consideration the likelihood that some amount of autistic character armor originates as an instinctive defense against sensory overwhelm (e.g., the pulled-inward embodiment that I discuss in the section of Chapter 4 entitled “Extending *Ki*”). Before breaking down and releasing such a defense, it’s a good idea to have an alternate coping strategy established to replace it. As noted in Chapter 4, the centering and grounding techniques taught in aikido served this function for me quite well; my training in those techniques was the groundwork that later enabled me to do my own de-arming process without becoming overwhelmed by the rich intensity of experience to which that process opened me. Similarly effective techniques for centering and grounding are part of many other transformative somatic practices. This two-stage formula, in which techniques for centering and grounding are learned before de-arming commences, is also recommended by some somatic psychotherapists as an approach to working with trauma (Ogden et al., 2006).

Stimming

A crucial theme that emerges in the final four sections of Chapter 5 is that stimming is essential to autistic wellbeing and should not be discouraged or suppressed. Because the idea that stimming ought to be suppressed in the interest of normativity is so deeply ingrained in the mindset of so many of the professionals who work with young autistics, I think this lesson bears repeating again here: stimming is essential to autistic wellbeing and should not be discouraged or suppressed.

It's also worth reiterating that in my own experience, at least, the ways in which stimming manifests tend to transform as stimming becomes more smoothly integrated into the flow and rhythms of the body's organismic dance through the de-armorng process. For me, the working methods of ParaTheatrical ReSearch were invaluable in recovering my full capacity for healthy stimming and integrating it into the overall dance of my embodiment in a harmonious way. There are other forms of transformative somatic practice that seem to me as if they'd also serve that purpose particularly well due to a similar emphasis on tuning into organismic impulses and giving them spontaneous embodied expression; two notable examples are Authentic Movement (Adler, 2002) and Continuum (Conrad, 2007).

Autistic Contributions

It's important to note that throughout much of my long history of participation in transformative practice I've been in teaching roles and positions of leadership. My story is not only a story of an autistic person finding a path to psychospiritual wellbeing through participation in communities of transformative practice, but also of an autistic person making substantial contributions to communities of transformative practice and to the psychospiritual growth and wellbeing of other (predominantly non-autistic) practitioners.

Many of my contributions in this regard are of the sort that might be made by any sufficiently advanced practitioner; almost anyone with my level of experience could teach a good aikido class, for instance. Some of my more valuable contributions, however, are the more novel and unusual ones that I'm

able to make as a direct result of the distinctively autistic qualities of my perceptual and cognitive style, such as my eye for small oblique adjustments in embodiment that can dramatically increase the flow and effectiveness of a student's performance of aikido *waza*.

In terms of praxis, then, I'd venture to suggest that two crucial implications of my narrative are that true inclusion will involve autistic participants in transformative practices (or in any other realm of human activity) not only in the roles of students and beneficiaries, but also as teachers and leaders; and that praxis aimed at cultivating positive autistic potentials should not neglect autistic potentials for leadership.

Possibilities for Further Research

Perhaps the greatest strength of autoethnography as a method of inquiry is that the focus on the researcher's lived experience enables the work to tell a deeply personal story, and personal stories often have a particular power to inspire. As I observed at the very start of this dissertation, there is currently a dearth of research and literature on the use of transformative practices by autistics as a means of pursuing self-actualization and the realization of positive psychospiritual potentials. One of my primary motives in producing this autoethnographic narrative has been the hope that it will both inspire further research in this area and serve as a useful jumping-off point for some of that research.

An obvious next step would be for interested researchers to begin gathering information regarding other autistic participants in transformative

practices, both through surveys aimed at amassing quantitative data and through narrative interviewing or other qualitative approaches aimed at gaining more in-depth understanding of the experiences of individual practitioners. A given study might cast a broad net, looking at autistic subjects who participate in any sort of transformative practice, or might narrow the focus in any number of ways—for instance, by looking exclusively at autistic meditators or autistic martial artists, or at the long-term results experienced by those who’ve been engaged in their practices for some specified minimum length of time. Studies might also focus on specific categories of experience that might arise for autistic participants, such as experiences of flow states, no-mind, ego-transcendence, or the long-term emergence of exceptional levels of overall psychospiritual wellbeing and self-actualization. And once again, autistic experiences of being teachers and leaders in the realm of transformative practice should not be neglected.

The various insights and recommendations I offer in the “Implications for Praxis” section of this chapter also merit further exploration; my suggestions in that section are based on my own experiences, and it seems to me that it would be worth finding out to what degree they’re supported by the experiences of other autistic participants in transformative practice.

These are just a few of the possibilities for further research that suggest themselves. Whatever specific avenues of inquiry or experiments with praxis this dissertation might come to inspire, I hope my examination of my own experiences in these pages will be of some use in awakening others to the understanding that being autistic is in no way inherently incompatible with psychospiritual

wellbeing, and that the systems of transformative somatic practice that have traditionally been recognized as pathways to the realization of higher psychospiritual potentials in non-autistic practitioners can serve that same function in the lives of autistic practitioners.

The research that I most hope this dissertation will inspire, however, is not formal academic research, but experiential research by individuals and communities—both autistic and non-autistic—into their own potentials for psychospiritual wellbeing and how they can realize those potentials through dedicated engagement in transformative practices. Generating scholarship and literature based on such experiences, as I've done in these pages, is extremely valuable but ultimately—in my view—of secondary importance to actually doing the work of bringing positive human psychospiritual potentials into realization and embodiment in the world.

CHAPTER 7: IN CONCLUSION

The opening chapter of this dissertation introduces the topic of autistic participation in transformative somatic practices, while Chapter 2 presents essential background information regarding autistic bodyminds and autistic experience. In Chapter 3, I discuss the nature of autoethnography and its vital importance as a means of bringing autistic voices and first-hand accounts of autistic lived experience into discourses on autism long dominated by non-autistic perspectives. In the autoethnographic narrative in Chapter 4, I examine my own experiences as an autistic practitioner and teacher of aikido. Themes that emerged in this narrative include the way the formal structures of traditional aikido dojo conduct and etiquette served to organically accommodate my social needs, making the dojo an environment in which I could interact with neurotypicals on a level social playing field not dominated by the usual expectations of neurotypical social performance; the ways in which the somatic awareness practices built into aikido training enabled me to overcome the challenges posed by dyspraxia and dissociation; and the ways in which certain qualities of autistic perception and cognition shaped my experience of aikido training and ultimately proved to be assets to me as a practitioner and teacher (e.g., instinctive attunement to the asocial over the social that made it easy for me to look beyond social cues to the deeper dynamics of interacting bodies, exceptional tactile and kinesthetic sensitivity, and affinity for what I've termed the aesthetics of emergence).

In Chapter 5, I continue my autoethnographic narrative with an exploration of how the movement-based ritual work of the experimental theatre

group ParaTheatrical ReSearch enabled me to resolve a long-standing state of psychospiritual crisis, heal long-term trauma stemming from a childhood environment in which I'd had to suppress my natural autistic embodiment in the interest of survival, recover that embodiment by releasing the deep character armor that kept it locked away, and finally begin to thrive. I discuss how my autistic perceptual and cognitive style gave me a natural affinity for the state of no-form, and how this affinity helped to facilitate my process of shedding character armor and recovering my natural embodiment; I also examine how somatic psychology concepts—like the release of character armor and Winnicott's (1965) conceptions of the True Self and False Self—were relevant to praxis aimed at autistic wellbeing and autistic self-actualization. In Chapter 6, I revisit some themes from the preceding chapters that merited further discussion, consider the implications that my experiences might hold for praxis, and conclude with some ideas regarding directions for future research.

Discourses on autism have traditionally been dominated by the voices and perspectives of non-autistic persons who view autistic bodyminds and autistic lives through the lens of what I've termed the pathology paradigm, in which it's assumed that being autistic is inherently a pathological condition and that praxis aimed at fostering the wellbeing of autistics should focus on bringing them into compliance with non-autistic standards of normativity. In recent years these assumptions have been challenged by the emergent neurodiversity paradigm, which frames neurocognitive variance as part of the natural spectrum of human diversity.

With the shift to the lens of the neurodiversity paradigm comes the possibility of envisioning entirely new approaches to fostering autistic wellbeing, approaches that aren't limited by the pathology paradigm's conflation of wellbeing with conformity and compliance. And new approaches are clearly needed: the ever-growing body of first-hand accounts by autistics regarding their own lived experiences points overwhelmingly to the conclusion that the various systems of normativity-oriented praxis generated by the pathology paradigm are consistently failing to support long-term autistic wellbeing and are in fact actively harmful and trauma-inducing (e.g., Asasumasu, 2012, 2013a; Bascom, 2012; S. R. Jones, 2013, 2016; Monje, 2016a). Autistic people, again, can only truly thrive as autistic people, not as imitations of non-autistic people; one does not attain long-term wellbeing by stifling one's True Self.

The pathology paradigm's dubious conflation of compliant normativity with wellbeing stands in marked contrast with perspectives on human wellbeing found in the fields of humanistic psychology, positive psychology, and transpersonal psychology. In these fields, optimal wellbeing is generally conceptualized not as compliance and conformity but as transcendence of rote normativity in the pursuit of psychospiritual growth, self-actualization, and realization of higher human potentials for authenticity, creativity, joy, wisdom, inner peace and stability, connection, intimacy, spontaneity, harmony, and peak experience.

In this dissertation, I argue that these humanistic conceptualizations of wellbeing and self-actualization are just as relevant and applicable to the lives of

the autistic as they are to the lives of the non-autistic, and that the psychospiritual wellbeing of autistics would be far better served by praxis focused on autistic self-actualization than by praxis focused on imposing normativity—and also that part of what autistic self-actualization and autistic psychospiritual wellbeing entails is the embracing and authentic expression of the distinctive qualities of autistic embodiment, cognition, and experience. I argue that the various forms of transformative somatic practice that have traditionally served to facilitate psychospiritual growth and self-actualization in their practitioners can serve this same function for autistic practitioners.

The focus on self-actualization and realization of higher human psychospiritual potentials found in humanistic psychology and transpersonal psychology integrates quite harmoniously with the neurodiversity paradigm. The idea of a psychologically healthy autistic person, much less a self-actualizing autistic person, is fundamentally at odds with the core assumptions of the pathology paradigm regarding the nature of autism, but is entirely compatible with the neurodiversity paradigm's emphasis on embracing and supporting each person's unique individuality and the positive potentials inherent in that individuality.

While I'm happy to say that there are now many first-hand narratives of autistic experience available—with more being written and published every year—this dissertation is the first one to focus on an in-depth exploration of autistic self-actualization through participation in transformative somatic practices. To the best of my knowledge, this dissertation also represents the first

substantial piece of academic work to integrate humanistic, transpersonal, and somatic psychologies with the neurodiversity paradigm, and the first substantial piece of academic work to explore how key concepts from the theory and praxis of humanistic, transpersonal, and somatic psychologies can be applied to the cultivation of autistic wellbeing.

My own life has been vastly enriched by the concepts and working methods recounted in these pages, and I hope that this documentation of my experiences will inspire readers to apply these concepts and methods toward the enrichment of their own lives and the lives of others. In the words of Morihei Ueshiba O-Sensei, founder of the art of aikido: “This is not mere theory. You practice it” (as quoted in Holiday, 2013, p. 177).

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