

MATTER AND SPIRIT

Two recent experiences have impacted my attitudes toward these vital forces, and I pause to digest them here.

THE MASSAGE EXPERIENCE

It all began with a twinge of pain in my lower back one day—not totally unusual since my new awareness of my lower body ever since knee surgery three years ago. But I am more alert to subtle indicators of imbalance, and hurry to seek relief. It turned out that my physical therapist was not available for two weeks.

However, in a synchronous moment at the health club one day I engaged in conversation with a woman on the bicycle next to me who spoke animatedly about her massage therapist “Paula”. A light broke, or a bell rang inside me! A massage!!!! I looked up “Paula” on the web and read reviews of clients who described her in terms I recognized as being not only competent, but also akin to the wholistic attitudes toward treatment I trust.

A few days later I entered Paula’s office, eager and hopeful. It had been years since my last massage, but this time I felt more than ready. Her practical homespun reception of me was instantly reassuring and without much hesitation, I entered the sheltered alcove, undressed and waited as she moved in, turned on a music tape, and began to work.

How can I describe the particular quality of this 45 minute period of total receptivity that became transformative? I look for words to convey it.

The therapist’s touch was firm, yet had the quality of a *caress*. It felt like *kneading* the contours of my back. The image is of my grandmother kneading bread dough. I was like that dough, in total bodily surrender.

I felt *round*—cushioned. I was not a mass of awkward bones, but I was flesh—alive and yielding to the kneading, letting it reshape me, smooth out the knots. Under the surface of my skin, I felt *substantial*.

I felt *cared for*, loved like a child. Secure. Thankful. Each turn of my body, from one side to another, and each shift to another area—like loving attention given to my feet or to my shoulders (where she found a knot and smoothed it)—I was not the one in control or deciding. I relaxed into trust.

And oh, would she touch my face! I knew this came toward the end. I always look forward to that moment when the therapist holds my face—a *primal caress* that sums up the whole experience

like a benediction. At that point, I always cry—grateful tears that release all the toxins of my way of being in my life.

Perhaps the root meaning of matter—*mater*, or mother—says it all. I was being mothered (or in my case perhaps grandmothered) by being rooted in *matter*—i.e., my body. So a new spiritual practice for me will be returning to massage on a regular basis, for touch is a basic human need.

THE MATISSE EXPERIENCE

A week later, I spent a morning at the MFA walking through the *Matisse in the Studio* show, something much talked about because of its special character. I walked in cognitively prepared for the unusual presentation that included all the actual objects in his studio that animated his working space and became not only the subjects of his paintings but also which influenced the way he experienced painting. So there were vases and pots, a special ancient chair, African sculptures, Chinese calligraphy, fragments of cloth—all of them influences on his work. The concept was clear and TV reviews had been intellectually interesting, but did not prepare me for the impact of encountering his work directly.

Now I was participating in Matisse's own experience in the way he saw the objects. Coming from my recent strong experience in massage, I was open to being influenced. My eyes were seeing, but also vulnerable to being affected by what was before my eyes. Like Matisse, who filled his studio with loved objects ("*Matisse purchased objects for the simple reason of having fallen in love with them*"), I was allowing myself to be touched by what I saw.

Matisse was clear that he wanted to create a feeling response in what he drew.

My purpose is to render my emotion. This state of soul is created by the objects that surround me and that react in me; from the horizon to myself, myself included. . . I express as naturally the space and the objects that are situated there, as if I had only the sea and the sky in front of me; that is to say, the simplest thing in the world.

He was not approaching his art in order to depict what he saw; rather what he felt. It was *introspection*, not *observation*.

Objects made emotional demands on Matisse, since he needed to feel something for them in order to work with them.

No wonder I was moved as I walked slowly through the gallery, pausing before each presentation—viewing first the actual object, and then Matisse's drawing coming from his relationship to that object.

In Matisse's art, the presence of the object reflects the relationship between the work and a reality that is no longer material but sensory—an intermediary between the world of material reality and the artist's inner mental reality.

Matisse said, “*These objects keep me company. . . I am not alone.*” Knowing this allowed me to join him across the divide of space and time. And his work was tactile—just as my massage had been. I saw the similarity:

The artist’s hands become one with what they touch, working in unison with both softness and strength, enjoying their contact with objects, with fabrics from central Africa, almost as much as his view of them while working.

Because of the way Matisse approached his work with these studio objects, *matter and spirit were joined* in a deep way, even to the point of expressing the unconscious.

Things acquired consciously permit us to express ourselves unconsciously with a certain richness. It is the presence of the object that triggers the work of the unconscious and enables the artist to slip into what he sometimes calls his garden. He had to first learn the object by heart, physically internalizing its form by repeating the movement of drawing it.

So the literal movement of his hands in drawing the object was what produced this rich contact with the unconscious. Was this indeed similar to what I had experienced in my own way during my massage?

Another element in the drawings was the way the space around and behind the object mattered to Matisse, like the drawing of a tree.

The importance of emptiness. Careful observation of the spaces between the leaves enabled him to distance himself from conventional representation and, through drawing, to internalize the plant’s vitality, the living sign of its form.

By analogy, the presence of the void also signifies emptying of the self and entering a receptive attitude in relation to the object or model that is somewhat akin to a Zen trance.

There was a playful element I noticed as I moved through the gallery spaces. He often did not isolate each of his cherished objects.

This was because he liked to cultivate their emotional reality by arranging meetings between the objects, bringing them into a range of different environments. He frequently changed the objects to highlight new relationships among them.

It’s relationships that interest me—me, my model, this or that object, they all form little worlds that have to be in tune.

Matisse referred to the “sympathy” among communing objects, reflecting once again the almost human sensibility he imagined for them. In each painting, the vase is surrounded by a particular space and light—as well as by other neighboring objects—that change how the viewers perceive it, but the vase is far from passive, since it also shapes the perception of the studio milieu around it.

The object is not so interesting by itself, it is the environment which the object creates

As I continued through the gallery, I felt my openness to Matisse’s work with his drawings of women, including nudes—something that must have drawn on my recent bodily memory of my experience in massage. Also, Matisse’s African influence became evident in the way womanly sensuousness—and seriousness—came across.

The female nude in academic art was at odds with his African collection of statues. In the academic realm, the nude should have delicate features in perfect balance and harmony, gently modeled with smooth transitions from one part to another, arranged in accordance with conventions believed to be based on close observation of the best in nature. To Matisse and his circle, this was a superficial concoction, unable to convey the authenticity they sought in representation in women’s bodies. The African sculpture he knew, though diverse in its manifestations, seemed to be constructed on the basis of an altogether different set of principles, emphasizing the integrity of spatial relationships over the fastidious mimetic re-creation of an observed figure.

He challenged aspects of identity as gender and sexuality. By imbuing them with a more fully human quality, Matisse ultimately allowed his nudes a more powerful and complex presence in his art.

While these drawings were arresting in themselves—and especially the series of his daughter showing her at 13, and again in her 30s, showing how Matisse saw “into” her maturation in deeply insightful ways—it was finally his self-portrait that riveted my attention.

I stood transfixed, first staring, then relaxing my gaze to take in what was “seeing me”. I moved to see if the eyes would follow me. The eyes (I’s) saw me, an “I”. I could not tear myself away for a long time. And since that day, it has changed the way I see other people. I look into the eyes, searching, wondering, receiving.

It is around those eyes in particular that the surface is worked up with revisions that it takes on a sculptural quality, as if Matisse has modeled his likeness rather than having painted it.”

The evocation of an individual's inner self was, for Matisse, more important than the accurate physical rendering. "I discovered amid the lines of the face those which suggest the deep gravity that persists in every human being."

The African influence was important. Instead of seeing the lines as crude or harsh, I sensed that in their original setting they may have conveyed something elemental and primitive and therefore more responsive to basic human emotions, especially those related to spirituality and authenticity

African masks were a means of unmasking and have a spiritual meaning. Matisse created portraits that peel away layers of resemblance to reveal his impression of a subject's true self.

Those masks acted as "mediators" joining the material and the spiritual, the visible and the invisible.

In the end, I ask, what matters? What matters to the spirit? And how are they united in some to-be-defined way—not through doctrine or dogma, but through the flesh and blood dailiness of life. I have yet to discover what it is to “*live with the materiality of things, to enter into all its possibilities*” and feel the wholeness of both together.

Massage and Matisse helped!

Musings by Eunice Russell Schatz, 2018

(Quotes come from the *Matisse in the Studio* book, with authors Ellen McBreen, Helen Burnham, Claudine Grammont, and Suzanne Preston Blier, among others.)