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THE YOGA OF GARDENING:  
Expanding the Boundaries Of the Body  
by nalawalla april 2007

Morning Yoga: The whiskers of the broom make a satisfying click on the floor as crumbs of sleepiness are swept from my muscles, sliding into the compost bucket. I switch hands, twisting to lubricate the other side of my spine. It feels good to be awake. On the next exhalation, I bend my knees gently to grasp this five-gallon bucket of offerings, now on its way to the compost deity. As I walk, bucket half-full (be kind to the joints, mama say!) a scene in the pay-per-gym flashes through my mind. Must we now pay for the privilege to release steam? Must we incarcerate with all of our huffing more horsepower than ten engines? Shovel and wheelbarrow abandoned to rust in the field? I breathe again. I empty the bucket. I mop my brow with my sleeve. The day is beginning.

-journal entry, April 2007

I am craving the fruits of an Earthy art; an art pollinated by the wisdom of the flowers and the buzzing wings of the wholistic sciences. My mouth is watering. So, I prepare the following recipe for a hearty, transdisciplinary Jumbalaya: chop and toss a variety of ingredients grown within the fertile garden of the arts. Then, add generous amounts of the vigorous volunteers growing beyond the garden fence—deep ecology, whole systems theory, permaculture, social change—to taste. Voila! A delicious, wildcrafted art-stew which mingles quite naturally with the diverse flavors of ecology.

I dish up a large bowl of this Jumbalayart and set it on the table. As evidenced by the contemporary upsurge in participatory, site-specific, and community-based art, people everywhere are creatively responding to postindustrial art-starvation. In contrast to the denatured, bleached and mass-produced forms of consumer art, the participatory arts are akin to local, whole foods. Not only are we personally nourished with illumination about our interconnectedness with all things, but our communities and landscapes are also fed by the application of these personal revelations in service of real change. There are people all around us hungry for this inclusive, highly nutritious art. Luckily, the pot stewing on the stove is very, very large.

After more than fifty years of auto-based sprawl carved into the flesh of North America, the physical healing of the living land and creation of truly humane places to dwell is a monumental undertaking that beckons us louder with each passing headline, each passing day. We have much work to do. To retrofit an entire continent in a compact style based once again upon the length of the human stride is a task that will require enormous amounts of manpower—and womanpower! How do we begin?

We can be grateful that we already have a perfect place to start. Good fortune has granted each and every one of us a body to consult for reliable information about how to treat the land. When we listen deeply to our bodies, which are a perfect microcosm of the larger Earth, we can hear the lessons of permaculture and social ecology: *Start small and slow down! Participate! Go with the flow! There is no such thing as waste! The problem is the solution!*

For instance, a bodybased practice such as yoga is a wonderful way to tune into the messages Earth is broadcasting. However, many of us tend to confine our practice to the studio, forgetting the origins of the word *yoga*, which comes from the Indo-European root *-yeug*, meaning “to yoke, to join.” The universal energies we yoke or harness in our yoga practice also come with a responsibility to apply them to our lives and our landscape. At this time in history, this “chop wood, carry water” aspect of yoga is more important than ever before.

Many of us invest ourselves in various martial art, yoga, dance, and theater studios, and wish we could spend even more time there. But, as rental costs rise, so does the cost of a tai chi class. (Repeat the permaculture mantra: *the problem is the solution.*) Yoga, tai chi, capoeira, commedia dell’arte, etc. can all train the body and mind to perform daily tasks with better alignment, efficiency and concentration. And as we become more sensitive to our own bodies, the bodybased arts are concurrently sensitizing us to Earth, environmental and social issues. So, instead of lamenting the fact that we don’t have ten bucks for yoga today, why not do a walking meditation on over to the neighborhood pea patch, and allow ourselves to observe what the garden and the neighbors need?

Gathering and spreading a wheelbarrow full of manure can take us through several yogic poses, including warrior one, and downward dog. If we want to stretch sore muscles after a long session on the computer, why don’t we simply help our neighbor plant her orchard, or harvest the kale for dinner? Then we are stacking functions by breathing deeply, keeping our muscles and joints toned, telling stories, sharing songs and

information, and creating positive change in the landscape all at the same time. The boundaries of our bodies expand to include garden, neighborhood, Earth-community. Yummy!

The reverse is also true. How many of us have thrown our backs out at the work party? When we recognize Earthwork to be the yoga that it is, we move more slowly and deliberately, checking for proper alignment, and we heed our bodies' requests for a break. We also find that we actually get more accomplished this way. If we rest when we are tired, hungry, thirsty, or sunburned, we avoid injury and can be of better service the following day. (Repeat the commonsense-ism: *slow and steady wins the race.*)

In sum, I am writing simply about balance. I am not suggesting that we drop out of our yoga or tai chi classes. After all, we have many good teachers in our communities who need our support! However, I am suggesting that we add some self-reliance and an expanded perspective to our practice. Four walls and a trained expert are not the only way to harness the power of yoga. And, especially at this time of "the Great Turning" of humanity towards a just and sustainable culture, we need many strong and healthy bodies outdoors, physically creating a sustainable landscape. Working, interacting, and participating, all together, in service of Earth—this *is* yoga.

Before our movement class, I am recording in my notebook the details of our last session in the studio—working with imagery of stone, mountain, water, leaves; "mud-luscious," describes Walt Whitman. The sun shines on my face, and for a moment my attention flies out the window to the beautiful, large rock almost completely overgrown by grasses in the empty lot next to this building. Rock speaks. She tells us she was cast clumsily aside by Vulgar Bulldozer. She says she will wait as long as it takes for us to come outside and roll her to her place of honor in the garden wall. She is very heavy. We are dancers, we say. We cannot come outside because we want to stretch our legs. We want to make our legs strong. Rock waits patiently.

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*Nalawalla is a transdisciplinary artist and activist working within the Bcollective on Marrowstone Island, WA. The Bcollective is an umbrella organization dedicated to creating healthy, sustainable and commonsense culture by enriching diversity along the boundary between the arts and ecology. The Bcollective offers community-building Bodyversity workshops, creates participatory performances for kids and adults, and hosts skillshares from water catchment to creative mediation. Please visit our website [www.bcollective.org](http://www.bcollective.org) for more info, or email [nala@bcollective.org](mailto:nala@bcollective.org).*