

**Thinking global** brings thought-provoking articles related to our work in a whole-world context to stimulate our minds and extend our thinking.

I am writing this on 21 December 2012. Some say the world will end on this day. I don't know enough about the Mayan civilisation to understand more fully the context for this prophecy, nor the reasoning behind the conclusion. However, what if we take this opportunity to reframe... to open the possibility that today is the day we change the world? Every day affords us the chance to transform what has gone before, and build something new - a new vision for our personal future... a new vision for the future of this world.

What kind of world could we create? Do you believe it is possible?

In our work we are alongside others as they begin to heal past hurts and step out into a new future. Sometimes we focus more directly on the future and find past patterns rise to the surface bringing challenges, and feelings, to the fore. Our expertise in working with the full range of

human experience is what puts us in a unique position to hold the unfolding future.

I can distract myself by thinking my part is small, that I am merely a facilitator of the future, listener, or even follower. In my listening and facilitation I am also holding an intention for growth and a belief in human capacity to move forwards. Am I therefore also holding an intention for the growth of society towards a more glorious world? What might be the impact of this? Perhaps I am not so small after all.

In this article **Karen White** describes her passion for bringing techniques drawn from ancient martial arts into South Africa - playing her part in healing a nation and rejoicing in the co-creation of a positive future.

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# Thinking global





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# Crossing cultures

using our bodies as a  
doorway to wisdom

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**Karen White** is working with **Wendy Palmer** to bring leadership embodiment to a diverse group of people in South Africa. In this article, she describes how she uses the principles of this Aikido-based practice in her work to access a deep, united wisdom that connects across the communities of her homeland.



**M**y view is that we are as much our body and biology as we are our intellect, emotions, relationships, culture, and spirituality. When we unify all these elements, we become much more functional and skilful in our lives, and are able to live in a way that honours the interconnectedness of life.

For many of us, though, paying attention to our body and our biology has at best been neglected and at worst ignored and repressed.

In Bruce Lipton's *Biology of Belief* he states: 'Positive thoughts have a profound effect on behavior and genes but only when they are in harmony with subconscious programming. And negative thoughts have an equally powerful effect. When we recognize how these positive and negative beliefs control our biology, we can use this knowledge to create lives filled with health and happiness.'<sup>1</sup>

Following on from this idea, we can use our bodies to influence our thoughts and emotions, and invite more positive ones. Our bodies can act as a source of intelligence and open up new avenues for the way we experience our environment, relationships, emotions and frame of mind. When this happens we can be more magnanimous, compassionate and open-hearted.

#### Why and how our body can be a source of wisdom

My friend and teacher Wendy Palmer says that 'the body always wins'. As a long term Aikido practitioner - a martial art involving throwing and

falling - she knows that telling your body to relax when someone is attacking you and being able to do so are distinctly different, especially if your attacker is twice your size, and much, much stronger. I ride horses and, based on my experiences of riding, would agree with her assessment. Even though I know relaxing and going with the horse will mean I ride with ease, grace and fluidity, I am not always able to accomplish this, especially when I feel threatened when the horse becomes unpredictable.

The same is true when we are stressed in our daily lives, whether in the boardroom, working with people, in traffic, being given bad news, parenting or any other situations that we experience as stressful. When under pressure, regardless of what we think we will do, more often than not we will revert to a base-line survival pattern. When this happens, we lose the ability to access big picture thinking, innovation and morality.

Research has now shown that our brain chemistry literally changes when we are stressed.<sup>2</sup> The hypothalamus reacts to stress by secreting hormones from the pituitary and adrenal glands, resulting in an increase in heart rate and elevated blood pressure. Following on, the prefrontal cortex, which is the area immediately behind the forehead, shuts down under stress. The role of the prefrontal cortex serves as the control centre that mediates our highest cognitive abilities, including judgment, insight and decision-making. So, being deprived

of this part of our brain under stress means we lose information and big picture thinking.

I can illustrate this anecdotally from a recent coaching conversation with a client. We were sitting in very comfortable surroundings, discussing this phenomenon. I asked her what she would do if a lion walked into the room. She said she would hide behind me. I laughed and told her she would have great difficulty as I wouldn't be standing in the room any more. We laughed together and then discussed what happens when we are frightened or stressed. In essence, as we lose access to our prefrontal cortex and release a healthy dose of adrenaline, we move into instinctual behaviour, which is fight, flight or freeze - a combination of both.

Sadly, many of us brought up in western cultures were taught to ignore our instincts and connection to our body and biology. Instead, we were encouraged to follow what our parents and teachers thought was right. For example, even if we weren't cold, we were told to put on an extra layer, or eat when we weren't hungry, and in most cases protesting didn't help. How then, could we possibly become embodied if we were being told to ignore our body's wisdom and insights?

#### Using the body

Given the culture I grew up in, I spent much of my 20s and early 30s focusing on developing my mind and becoming more skilled in my field of work, which was the human sciences. I saw my body as simply being attached to my head and gave it little regard. As I developed, a realisation slowly dawned on me - my body also had useful information, if I could only learn to pay attention to it.

As my understanding of the body grew, so did my curiosity, and I went off in search of more knowledge. Along the way I read *The Intuitive Body* by Wendy Palmer.<sup>3</sup> It had a profound impact on me. As I was reading the book, I realised insight doesn't necessarily automatically translate to a different way of being. In fact, I had been a long-term yoga practitioner and became conscious that doing a body practice like yoga didn't translate to me being in my body in my daily life. It also didn't change my behaviour and I could be serene and at ease on the yoga mat, and irritable and angry off it.



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In the book, Wendy speaks about cultivating the capacity to return to centre. She describes our centre as 'the part of us that remembers we belong to the universe, the part that feels no need to protect itself since it is not in opposition. For me, centre is fed by desire, passion, and curiosity for the experience of essential contact.'<sup>3</sup> There are many different ways to describe centre and many types of centering. In this view, when we are centred we are essentially accessing the flow or the zone state.

Coming back to biology, through centering we work with our bodies in a way that changes our brain chemistry and physiology. This then predisposes us to being able to access big picture thinking, creativity and morality, and experience a sense that we are all interconnected, as opposed to separate and individualistic. The key distinction with this work is that we learn how to centre while under pressure, using the body as a vehicle. By doing so, we are able to reactivate our prefrontal cortex while experiencing physical pressure and develop a centred state in the midst of stress.

Great leaders like Nelson Mandela, the Dalai Lama, Gandhi and Martin Luther King have shown the ability to act from a centred state that honours and includes in a way that often beggars belief, given their history. If you study the profiles of these exceptional leaders, the one thing that differentiates them becomes clear: they have or had some practices that helped them develop themselves so that they could be skilful under pressure and act in ways that were powerful and altruistic.

And so I started down the path to using my body as a doorway to wisdom and my humanity and I began training as a leadership embodiment teacher and coach. Wendy agreed to come to South Africa and we shared the work with many different people.

At the heart of the practice is learning how to keep recovering the centred part of ourselves that has been forgotten and needs rehabilitating. People who attended workshops and programmes benefited greatly. Most of them came from backgrounds of privilege and had access to resources, such as time and money. We decided that we wanted also to share the practices with people from under-served and

previously disadvantaged communities. It could provide them with tools and practices that could change the way they relate to their circumstances, and give them new ways of being that could open up new possibilities for their lives.

### Crossing boundaries

We were fortunate that we received funding from a not-for-profit organisation and were able to move forward with the intention to work with people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Although I had agreed it would be a good idea and was committed, I did have reservations, given the challenges of language and socio-economic boundaries. I wasn't sure how we would express the work in ways that would be easy for the recipients to understand.

In spite of this, I approached organisations and individuals who I thought would be interested and could benefit from the work. It was not hard to find people willing to help. There is so much good work being done by individuals, past and present, who are passionate about the development of people who don't have easy access to resources. Everyone I approached created time for conversations without any fuss or fanfare. Through these conversations I was struck by how resourceful, generous and open South Africans are, and how the desire to help support others is ever present, even in the face of difficult challenges.

As I write this now, I marvel at being a South African. Given that we were a country so defined by racial boundaries, I am astounded that we are not governed and trapped by this history. I am a white South African and was 27 at the time of the

free and fair elections in 1994. For the past 18 years, we have lived in a country that isn't legally segregated. This has invited all kinds of new possibilities in how we live and relate, and I feel privileged and humbled to be a part of this new path we are creating together.

South Africa still has many difficulties, and the legacy of apartheid will remain for many years to come. Indeed, I don't think one ever escapes one's history. Instead, what matters is how we integrate and move forward, as it allows for living in the moment rather than being bound by our history. Using the body as the gateway to living in the moment and being open are key to this approach.

After holding initial meetings with potential delegates and offering them tasters of what they would experience on the programme, there was excitement, interest, and some scepticism. A number of people signed up and committed to learning about leadership embodiment. Participants ranged from organisations and schools to small, not-for-profit companies and individuals who wanted to develop themselves and help others.

Initially what struck me was how great our differences were in terms of racial groups, culture and class distinctions. We were a rainbow group to match our rainbow nation. There were privileged people, not just white, and there were people who came from a background of poverty.



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As we went on, though, it didn't seem to matter, and everyone took their places as human beings and contributed and learned with dignity and openness. Together we were able to create a container that allowed for us to meet each other beyond race, class, knowledge or experience. Everyone's perspective mattered and was valued.

This really was the gift of offering tools and practices that use the body as a starting point. In the groups we worked with there were black, coloured, Muslim, white, Indian, fully able and disabled people. You might think that, with all these differences, there would be complexity and a degree of discomfort. And yet, what struck me as we worked with these different people and communities was that we don't need a sophisticated language or explanation for what it is to be a human being. Actually, that often clouds our vision and sets up separation, hostility and fear. Instead, if we honour our humanity by using our bodies to enter into this human experience, we can be open and expansive, and share with honesty and humility. There is no need to cover up anything, or make something out of nothing.

As we began sharing the centering exercises, the practices united us and allowed for deep and meaningful connections without words, and only then exploration through conversations. With partners or in groups, we were able to learn skills and to share our stories in a way that was illuminating, empowering, compassionate and rich. In essence we learned a universal language, which meant that, even if our mother tongue was different or our ability with language was disparate, it didn't matter and we could appreciate each other because we are human beings. An integral part of this language is listening. As one of the participants noted: 'Instead of listening to respond, I was listening to understand.'

At the end of the programme, each one of us was changed. The time spent together was a deep, personal experience of what it is to meet each other as human beings at our best, without the need to make difference a problem. We simply didn't indulge in all the overlays we so often place on engagements with each other. Instead, our differences - racial, gender, sexual, economic and social - were part of our basic humanity, and no

assessments, good or bad, were made. The differences added to the experience with simplicity and ease, which was counter to what can normally transpire when a diverse group of strangers come together to learn and grow.

In closing, I think, because of our challenging and flawed history, we have as a nation developed resilience, strength and the capacity to be inclusive in ways that we often are not aware of or don't pay attention to. We appreciate, understand and, more importantly, live diversity really well as a nation, and I am reminded of the grit of sand in an oyster that becomes a pearl. Using the body as a way into this understanding offered a crisp and clean way to notice this afresh. It gave us the opportunity to experience what it is to access wisdom, compassion and confidence in a way that makes us, and those with whom we interact, more, not less. ■

## References

- 1 Lipton BH. The biology of belief. London: Hay House; 2008.
- 2 See Arnsten A, Mazure, CM, Sinha R. Everyday stress can shut down the brain's chief command center. Scientific American, April 2012. [http://www.mc3cb.com/pdf\\_articles\\_interest\\_physiology/2012\\_4\\_10\\_Stress\\_Shut\\_%20Down\\_Brain.pdf](http://www.mc3cb.com/pdf_articles_interest_physiology/2012_4_10_Stress_Shut_%20Down_Brain.pdf)
- 3 Palmer W. The intuitive body: discovering the wisdom of conscious embodiment and Aikido (3rd edition). Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books; 2008.

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For more information, including details of leadership embodiment opportunities in the UK, visit <http://embodimentinternational.com/>