

My Body, The Wetland

by Elaine Colandrea

For the past 30 years, I have waded, paddled a canoe, and camped in wetland environments, traveling with my biologist husband in the United States, Canada, and the British Isles. We have explored fresh and saltwater marshes, fens, bogs, and swamps in all kinds of weather and at all times of the year. These experiences have informed my work as a dancer, massage therapist, and movement teacher in rich and varied ways, as I have explored the similarities between wetlands and the human body. Those similarities have been most notable in my practice of Continuum, a form of inquiry founded on the biological reality that the human body is mainly fluid. Continuum uses breath, sound, and movement to access and stimulate cerebrospinal fluid, blood, lymph, and interstitial fluid, as well as the fluids within cells. My Continuum experiences in my own internal wetland, my body, parallel my experience of being in natural wetland environments; each has enriched the other.

The Vital Role of Fluids

Wetlands are the part of the landscape where water and land commingle. My favorite way to travel in a wetland is by canoe; the meandering channels that make up the water route are often the easiest way to navigate the marshy landscape. But whether you go by land or by water, there is rarely a straight line in a natural wetland. Rather, travel must follow a complex network of channels that sometimes appear directionless. The curving pathways of a wetland slow the movement of the water, allowing sediments to settle and nutrients to accumulate, and offering a safe space for fish and amphibians to lay eggs and birds to nest. Because of their wandering pathways, wetlands are fertile and nutrient-rich areas of the landscape.

In Continuum, I explore fluid movement with my body, in curving, spiraling, waving, undulating motions that rarely follow a straight line. In the torso and spine, invoking fluidity will lead to undulations; in the arms and legs, fluid motion may look more like the tentacle movement of an octopus or the movement of seaweed in water. Tracking fluid motion as it travels through me, I cannot help but feel myself following the curving, meandering pathways of the marsh, only now the waterways I follow are internal.

As I move in this fluid way, tight muscles begin to soften, sore muscles are eased by the increase in circulation. Internal organs decompress and bones reacquaint themselves with their malleable nature. The increase in circulation nourishes every cell in my body. I become more aware of the continuous, spiraling web of connective tissue that surrounds each organ, bone, and muscle, a web that would reveal the shape of my body even if all my skin and internal structures were to disappear. As I attune to my fluidity, my mutable nature becomes apparent to me. I shift my sense of density and

form, like a wetland absorbing what flood waters it can and releasing the overflow to surrounding areas.

Wetland waterways, in their natural state, create an effective filtration system that removes toxins and debris from the water that passes through it, as well as allowing nutrients to settle out. Water revitalizes itself by moving slowly in circuitous pathways. This system is so effective that some communities are building marshes to treat sewage. Our bodies have a parallel system of filtration and purification. The amazing fluid-filled network of veins, arteries, and lymphatic vessels that brings oxygen and other vital nutrients to the trillions of cells in the human body also carries off carbon dioxide and other by-products of cellular metabolism.

Circulation is propelled by movement – the movement of the waters in the wetlands and of blood and lymph, among others, in the human body. Many of the breaths, sounds, and movements in Continuum are intended to animate the circulatory system, enhancing its natural function and making it more dynamic. The Hu breath, for instance, is a pumping breath in which the inhalation and exhalation are equal. The Hu breath vitalizes the fluids in a body, moving them in and out, in the same way that a rain shower or tidal fluctuation refreshes a wetland.

Fluid Explorations, Internal and External

Exploring the waterways, whether of a marsh or of my own body, engenders a sense of discovery. Finding a path to follow through a wetland can be challenging – even the well-traveled canoe routes through the Okefenokee Swamp in southern Georgia change seasonally and vary with weather conditions. Erik and I have paddled through here for days, camping at day's end on platforms that were often the only solid surface for miles. These routes require great attention not only to the manmade trail markers, but also to the nature of the moving water itself. Changing water levels, shifting peat masses, and the alligators that settle onto the camping platforms for a nap are unknowns to be met and navigated.

Not quite knowing where I am going as I follow the winding channels of the marsh or the flowing movements of a Continuum exploration, I encounter a kind of dissolving. My attention becomes more fluid, going inward and outward simultaneously; the boundary between myself and the environment becomes less clear, the way land and water intermingle in the marsh. A state of open attentiveness to myself and my world, including what I cannot completely know, informs my consciousness, and I am led to meet the unknown from a deeply inhabited sense of self. Refining my experience of my inner world increases my sensitivity to the world beyond my own skin, the environment I inhabit. My experience is paradoxical: the more I quietly settle into myself, whether in a Continuum exploration or on a sunset paddle in the marsh, the more I become aware of my connectedness to everything around me, and the interconnectedness of all things.

Building a Perspective of Wholeness

The miraculous sense of interconnectedness that Continuum restores to me has profound repercussions. As a massage therapist, I have been trained to distinguish

specific identities and separations between muscle and bone, nerve and blood, cranium and sacrum, to name a few. My massage training is based on a mechanical model of the body, one that breaks the human body down into discrete systems. But this approach leads to fragmented knowledge and isolated treatment. Thus, when someone develops carpal tunnel syndrome, the forearm and hand are treated as a unit separate from the rest of the body. The shoulder, torso, alignment, breath, and movement of the individual are largely ignored, though these factors may all have important effects on what happens with the hand and arm.

In fact, no injury or chronic pain problem can be resolved without regarding the body as a holistic system operating in a complex context. Healing, as opposed to simple treatment, requires looking at the individual's interactions with her body and her environment. To recognize, as Continuum practice does, that our bodies – like the weather, like the landscape, like the seasons – are always changing, ever mutable and capable of adaptation, supports a holistic approach to any condition. From the perspective of Continuum, the key to health is awareness: one needs to slow down, explore options in multiple directions, and remain in inquiry. Often, there is not cultural support for this approach to health.

Unfamiliarity with such a holistic perspective extends to how we view – and treat – the earth's body. Often, human choices are made without regard for the wholeness of the body of the earth. At times, these choices lead to surprise, shock, and feelings of disassociation, along with economic distress. Human disasters, like the loss of homes inappropriately located on an unstable hillside further destabilized by heavy rains or the destructive flooding of a beachside community during a hurricane, are examples of the cost of our failure to grasp the relationship between all the many aspects of the earth. Understanding the complexity of the interrelationships between land and water could lead to different choices that might minimize the effects of natural disasters.

There are many less dramatic cases. For example, runoff from a development site at the edge of a wetland can have disastrous consequences. The additional material flowing into the wetland from the construction represents a loss of valuable topsoil from upland environments. It is also degrading to the wetlands, where it can cause siltation, filling in the wetland and robbing it of its ecological value.

When the interconnection of land and water is understood, measures can be taken to develop land in more sensitive ways. Intelligent planning can occur when communities, government agencies, and developers understand the biology of the landscape they live in and interact with. This requires a holistic view of the environment, one that acknowledges the intricate relationship human activity has to the environment and the complexity of the environment itself.

How can I as a living, growing organism learn to function from a perspective of wholeness rather than fragmentation, and help others to do so? How can an outlook that honors the interconnectedness of all things inform my relationships with my body and with others, my professional work, and my interactions with the natural world I inhabit? Continuum offers a way to experience and embody our interconnectedness. By encouraging us to directly experience the biological nature of our internal landscape,

Continuum allows us to see our bodies as whole, living systems and as organisms that are extensions of the earth's body. The experience of Continuum can alter how we live in relationship to the earth's ecosystem.

Awakening Perception Internally and Externally

Whether I am paddling in a wetland or moving through the depths of a Continuum exploration, I enter a quiet, slowed, attentive state that both makes me acutely aware of my physical self and dissolves the boundaries between my self and my environment.

In the wetland, there is no choice but to slow down; the water is shallow and the curving routes don't allow speed. Personal silence is rewarded. Speed and noise are prevalent in the everyday world, but in the marsh, moving slowly and quietly allows the wonders of this watery world to reveal themselves. The soft clucking of a mallard hidden in the reeds, the distant splash of an osprey diving for its dinner, the quick submergence of the muskrat as I round a bend can be missed all too easily in the absence of quiet, focused attention.

As I slow down and listen to my own internal, marsh-like world, my nervous system calms and distracting thoughts fade away. I tune into my body's primary language, the language of sensation. I notice the movement of my breath, its depth, speed, and quality. I notice where I feel internally spacious or compressed. I experience a plethora of other sensations. My perceptual capacity broadens and my sensory systems stimulate each other. Synesthesia, or commingling of the senses, may occur. Other internal realities emerge and I begin to learn about my own vastness of being. At times, as I move, it is like I am following a scent internally, at other times it is an internal sound. It is not so different in the marsh; sometimes the sound of wings beating draws my attention skyward to a flock of ducks, or a musky odor tells me a mammal is nearby. With focused attention, I become an observer of both inner and outer worlds.

Like the earth's marshes, my body is a world in which fluids are primary. Spending time in marshes has opened my eyes to the nature of the universe and the earth's body. Continuum has helped me realize the wetland nature of my body and understand how, with my own fluid movement, I am closely related to the earth's body. My body, the wetland.