

GROWTH AND LEARNING IN Unpreserved Dissection



BY ERIC MOYA
CST-D, MS/MFCT

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One of the aspects of being a therapist I love most is being in awe of the many ways a person can come to know “Self” better. Whether it is in becoming aware of how that hypertonic muscle has impacted movement patterns or having someone holding space during a difficult time, some of the biggest benefits we offer our clients is in the opportunity for them to come to know Self better, to gain awareness, and to integrate dysfunctional patterns -- from the microscopic to the macroscopic. And it doesn't only work that way with our clients, being therapists and teachers are also potent ways to come to know Self better. As we ponder our work with clients, receive mentoring from peers, and learn from our work with clients, we have the opportunity to self-reflect and grow too. And the unpreserved dissection experience might be one of the most profound opportunities for professional and personal reflection I've yet seen.

Many vivid dissection experiences come to mind quickly, but the memory that rises to the surface most immediately was a class about 15 years ago when I was not yet an instructor for our unpreserved dissection class, but was a teaching assistant apprenticing to teach the class. Through an error on the part of the facility, they had mistakenly told the head anatomist that our class would be arriving on the following weekend. This meant

that the instructor and myself showed up to class on the first morning to discover that they didn't have a cadaver for us to dissect! And within an hour, we would have 14 students arriving from around the country who were excited to dissect. What a shocking moment!

There was an uncomfortable moment of silence as the three of us stood there thinking there wasn't going to be a solution. Then the director of the facility mentioned that they had one cadaver that had been deemed unfit for the medical school gross anatomy lab. She was 87 years old at time of death and weighed less than her age. She had been so frail and feeble that her musculature wasn't developed enough for medical school gross anatomy purposes. Instead, they were going to

terior cervical musculature. All structures that wouldn't have been touched by her frailty. We prepared her and none of the students in the class had any idea of the potential drama by the time they arrived nervous and excited for human dissection.

For the next three days, we all appreciated her; learned from her; honored her; and loved her as the students explored their CranioSacral Therapy course knowledge in a true three dimensional fashion. We got to vividly see the relationship between the dura mater and the neurocranium. We got to see the beautiful architecture of the intracranial membrane system. We got to examine the relationship of the occiput, C1, C2, and related musculature. We got to see the nerve rootlets as they arise out of the spinal cord and get delicately surrounded by the meningeal layers and become the epineurium of the peripheral nerve. We received a chance to see the thickness of vertebrae and truly feel the truth of the phrase that “the spine is never meant to see the light of day”. We got to examine the lungs, pericardium, eyes, nerves, liver, kidneys, omentum, stomach, and so much more

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And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour**

– William Blake

cremate her and have the group memorial and burial they do at the conclusion of the semester. He didn't think that we would be able to use her either and mentioned her as a consolation. He led us into the refrigerator where we got to take a look at her.

She was perfect.

You see, since the class was a CranioSacral dissection class, we were mainly concerned with her CranioSacral system (brain/spine, meninges, sacrum, cranium, vertebrae). We were also concerned with her paraspinal musculature, internal organs, sub-occipital musculature, and an-

than I can mention is a short article.

As the teaching assistant for that particular course, I focused on helping the instructor do the major dissections and I assisted the students in their excitement and nervousness. I also tried to be careful to help the students engage the critical mind and anatomical knowledge when needed, and as larger more transpersonal thoughts surfaced, I helped and held space for the complex feelings and thoughts that accompany close contact with death and dying. Basically holding space for everything that happens



> when touching and contacting our structure once it is finally devoid of our life. You see, at some point, there's no escaping the realization that this was a woman with 87+ years of history and stories. – and everything that uniquely means to each person.

The biggest moment for me in that course was in dissecting her heart. It was on the third day of the course. We had removed her breast plate and gotten a chance to examine the relationships between organs of the thoracic cavity - the lungs, heart, pleura, pericardium, respiratory diaphragm, ribs, thoracic vertebrae, larynx, bronchi, and the associated sympathetic/parasympathetic nerve chains. I gently dissected the greater blood vessels and disconnected the heart, so that I could remove it from her chest cavity.

One thing you have to understand about the difference between preserved and unpreserved tissue: there really is no comparison educationally between preserved and unpreserved tissue. When we run these classes at most locations, we have the full unpreserved cadaver and two unpreserved heads. Preserved tissue loses all of its color and flexibility and resilience. Unpreserved tissue carries all of the color, vibrancy, juiciness of . . . well . . . you and me. When we run these classes, we have the unpreserved full cadaver, two unpreserved craniums, and then we also have about a dozen preserved and previously dissected cadavers from the medical school gross anatomy courses. Students have the chance to see preserved and unpreserved tissue side by side. For most students it's a chance to come to greater appreciation for the movement inherent in the tissues we are born with and transform with our personal history.

So, after three days of holding space for the instructor and the students, I had a approximately 30 precious uninterrupted minutes of dissecting this woman's heart. I remembering examining the swirl arrangement of the cardiac musculature. I palpated the cardiac septum and carefully created window cuts in the left ventricle and the right atrium. I had a chance to be amazed at how challenging it was to dissect the softness of an unpreserved heart compared to the stiffness of a preserved heart. I was surprised at the thickness of the ventricular musculature compared to the thinness of the atrial musculature. I was blown away by the artistry of the chordae tendineae. I was fully immersed in the detail of the heart.

And then something transformative happened.

My awareness pulled back, out of the detail, and I realized I was holding a human heart in my hand. That this machine managed to beat uninterrupted for 87+ years. It looked young and beautiful too. There would have been no way to identify this heart from the heart of a much younger person had I

not personally removed it. And it was a stark lesson that just because someone is old and emaciated on the outside, doesn't mean that they are on the inside.

Of course, that sounds incredibly obvious to say. Not something that many people would disagree with intellectually. But something about the process of tactilely witnessing that lesson provided a depth that has positively impacted my ability to hold my clients in a state of unconditional positive regard. In other words, the experience made me a better therapist, not just because of the anatomical knowledge, but also in an ability to be with clients better.

I feel fortunate to be able to teach these classes now, and I'm thankful that the dissection class that we offer through

the Upledger institute has the rare benefits of working with unpreserved cadavers. I am also very thankful that the class is structured in a way to not only focus on the important anatomical learning, but that there is enough spaciousness to allow for the more

. . . human aspects of the class.

So, back to the idea of coming to know "Self" better. Pretty much any experience has the

seeds within it for personal reflection and growth. But the more day to day experiences are a bit quieter, harder to notice. It's the unique experiences, such as being a bodyworker touching people for a living and then being able to actually get your hands inside and feel and see an unpreserved cadaver with all the same characteristics as your day to day practice. That's a rare experience worth seeking out. I hope to see some of you in the future.

