

THE BEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF BEING

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This is a very brief summary of a few apparently disparate bodies of work that actually link up together nicely, as they all in fact point to the same underlying thing. I first came to these different traditions through reading about and experimenting with the Alexander Technique. Alexander definitely discovered something about the way our bodies work that many had missed up until that point. But what Alexander stumbled upon is actually much bigger (and simpler) than he realised, with vast implications, and not just for our bodies.

Part 1 of this article will run through some key concepts. Part 2 will attempt to describe how to use these concepts in everyday life. There are references to David Gorman below, see his website at: learningmethods.com for more information on his work. Donald Ingber's work is at: <http://web1.tcb.harvard.edu/research/ingber/>

PART 1

Elastic

The human body is a *tensegrity* system. At every scale or level, from the 'macro' level of organs and limbs right down to the cellular and sub-cellular level. Traditionally structures use a combination of tension and compression elements, and these are fairly distinct and used for their own purposes. But in a tensegrity structure the tension and compression elements work together so that forces are distributed evenly across the entire structure. Any force applied

to a tensegrity structure is evenly distributed across the entire structure — traditional structures such as buildings don't do this, any force applied to them or by them upon themselves create focused forces in particular areas, which the design of the building does its best to minimise, usually by making most parts of the building compressive.

Below you can see a picture of a child's toy built using tensegrity principles. The wooden rods act as compressive elements, and the elastic string acts as the tension elements. If you compared it with our musculo-skeletal system in a very simple way, the rods are like bones and the elastic string is like our muscle and other connective tissue. You can squash this toy in any way you wish, and the forces will distribute themselves evenly across the whole structure, and afterwards it will immediately rebound



to its original shape. This is because the compression and tension elements distribute all forces evenly across the structure. It also then doesn't matter which way the structure is held in space - it has no preferential 'up' or 'down' direction, or any other direction.

How does this actually look in the human body? It's easiest to see in the musculo-skeletal system, although again keep in mind that the tensegrity mechanisms are at every scale and are therefore in every organ and system and cell of the body — and these different 'parts' are all connected to each other and form a single, unified system. One of the most surprising things you might notice if you could see a human body stripped of its skin is how much muscle and other connective tissue there is. We're completely *wrapped* in muscle and connective tissue.

This doesn't match up at all with what a lot of us were taught in biology. Muscles were often described as being in pairs, and compared to levers in analysing how they work. So you implicitly built up a model in your head of your muscles in bits and pieces all around your body, with not much sense of there being a connection or relationship between them. But when you look at a human body without skin you see straight away that all of your connective tissue forms what David Gorman calls a 'suit'. A single, snug-tight suit enveloping all of the internal organs and bones. And connected to those as well, for as Ingber says, the entire body is tensegrity systems nested within more tensegrity systems, right down to the tiniest detail. Every bit of you is always completely connected to every other bit of you.

For me just knowing that changes straight away how it feels to be inhabiting my body. Because in effect what this means is that you don't have any 'parts'. It's all just one, unified and connected thing. David Gorman describes this suit as an 'elastic suit', because the muscles are pre-stressed by gravity and the suit is therefore like a stretched elastic band. Your skeleton sits inside this suit and is suspended in/by it, and the skeleton in turn acts as a spacer for these muscles, stretching them out into a recognisable 'human' shape. Bones are some of the compressive elements in this tensegrity structure, although again in a genuine tensegrity structure there are no absolute distinctions, as bones themselves then have both compressive and tensile elements.

Cells

Tensegrity is how *all* of you is knitted together, right down to your cells and beyond. From micro to macro. For example how a cell develops, i.e. what sort of cell it becomes, has been shown to depend on the forces placed upon it. The cytoskeleton of the cell, for example, will determine whether more cells are produced or cells are destroyed. A very flat cell, i.e. one that has been stretched together with its cytoskeleton, suggests that more cells are needed to cover that particular area, and so flat cells divide, producing more cells. Rounder cells suggest the opposite, that there are too many cells in that particular area jostling for space and thus a tumour is a possibility. So very round cells undergo cell death, to prevent this. In between these two extremes normal cell and tissue functioning occurs.

An obviously exciting implication of this is that the health and actual make up of your body, at every scale, is shaped by the physical forces on your body. Much research has been done on the chemical, biochemical and genetic behaviours of your cells and other parts of your body, but these are very often secondary responses to forces in your body. If forces or stresses are focused and maintained in your body, anywhere, then your cells and body chemistry are changed by these forces and your body physically changes. This is how many cancers develop, cancer cells have also been shown to develop from physical forces applied to them. There are now research programs working to reverse cancer and other diseases using physical means.

Micro and Macro

The most exciting implication of the scale independence of tensegrity structures is that anything you do at the macro level of what you normally think of as 'you' flows right through you, to every level, down to the tiniest gene and gene chemical. So while there are research programs as mentioned above working at the cellular and tissue level on cancers and other conditions, you have the ability to fundamentally shape your own body, at every level, through how you go about things at that macro level. That includes the ability to both avoid disease, and to actively reverse it or significantly mitigate it once it's there.

Gravity

Being upright is an important thing to understand in relation to the body and tensegrity. While you can get a sense of how that elastic muscle suit holds you suspended in the forwards and backwards and side to side directions, what stops it all falling to the ground i.e. downwards? The answer is not what you might expect. It's *gravity*. Popular views of gravity assume it's a force acting downwards on things, towards the ground. "What goes up must come down", etc. But that's not how gravity works. Gravity is a force *between* two bodies, generated by those bodies themselves — we'll stick with Newtonian gravity for simplicity. Any two masses are mutually attracting each other at all times, to a greater or lesser extent.

So not only is the Earth acting upon us, but we are acting upon the Earth. We are equally 'pulled' towards each other. The only reason objects such as ourselves head towards the Earth and don't float is because the Earth is much bigger, and therefore this equal force between us makes these much smaller objects move towards the Earth. An analogy would be imagining you pulling a small person and a huge person with the same force. The smaller person might fall over, and the huge person may hardly move at all, even though you pulled them with the same force.

Once you and the Earth actually come into contact, it's important to remember that all forces act in pairs, there is no such thing as a single force acting alone. High school physics. So if I push on a wall, the wall pushes back on me with an exactly equal force, in the other direction. Otherwise it would fall over. The same happens when you stand on the ground. The gravitational force generated between you and the Earth is the same size acting on you and the Earth, but it draws you towards the Earth, because it's much bigger. Then when you touch the Earth that force keeps being there and the only place for it to go is into you and into the Earth, at the same time. So UPWARDS into you. Otherwise you would fall into the Earth beneath your feet.

We tend to think of the Earth as a static lump of unmoving stuff beneath us that we more or less fall onto, but there is no stable place like that in the universe. All stability is relative to the masses involved, if you're floating around in outer space you certainly won't feel that there is any solid ground for

you to rest on, but if you find a planet that's much, much bigger than you then you will be drawn towards it and when you touch it will certainly feel stable simply because of its size relative to you. If you zoom out from the Earth it's obvious that it itself floats in space, in the gravitational field of other bodies like the sun. It's not just sitting there.

So if you stand on the Earth in a balanced way, the total or net force on you is *zero*. Your weight acting downwards is exactly balanced by the Earth pushing back up on you. You need absolutely no effort to be upright, because the Earth is always just there, balancing your weight pushing down with *exactly* the same force pushing up. So you should just be sitting or standing there in space with no sense of weight or any force at all, as if every particle in your body was just floating where it is (which in a sense it is, because the net force on each of those particles is zero). Most don't notice this because they don't know it, and assume that if they stop holding on desperately in their various postures, they will slouch and slump and fall to the ground.

This is obvious. For example if you look at any object sitting on your desk, or your desk itself sitting on the ground, it's clear that they're just *there*. They don't need to 'hold themselves up' because we all just know that objects resting on the ground sit there 'upright'— this is because of the forces described above, but you don't even need to know that for it to be an obvious fact that things don't need to be held up when they're resting on the ground. They may be unbalanced sometimes and want to topple sideways, but you have a full muscle suit that stops that for you. Put your body on the ground or on a chair and it will just sit there effortlessly erect, there's no need for you to continuously haul it upwards to keep it there.

So you have a full elastic suit stopping you from falling forwards or backwards or from side to side, without you having to do a thing. And gravity is pushing right up through every bit of you, keeping you upright by balancing exactly your weight acting downwards. So to just stand or sit, to just *be*, you need to do *nothing*. Not one tiny bit of effort. Zero effort. And yet many people do use a lot of effort every day to do these things, because they don't realise their body is set up to do it all for them. They can't even stand in one spot or sit on a chair for more than a couple of minutes without shifting and

pulling themselves upwards and so on, because they think that's all stuff they have to do to fight gravity. But gravity is on their side, it will hold them up without them having to do a single thing, if they let it.

Moving

So how do we actually take this effortless suspended system and get it to move? We tend to think that's also something we need to do, to use effort. To move our legs to walk, and so on. But even when we move *no effort is required*. None at all, zero. Energy is needed, but not effort. We don't need to 'do' a thing to move i.e. we don't need to 'make any effort'. If you're standing and want to walk towards something, your entire body right down to the smallest molecule releases some of its tension in that direction so that you are sprung forward. You haven't needed to move any bits. It all moved at once, your entire body. Of course you can interfere with this and try to move bits, and then you'll feel tension and effort as you throw the whole, unified system out of whack.

All the things people often do, of trying to move parts of themselves at once — of moving their legs or arms, or hauling their torso upwards to stop slouching when they sit in a chair — makes no sense at all from the point of view of this tensegrity suit. Like a balloon, the suit is a single, continuous, elastic structure that dissolves any way in which a leg is separate from an elbow, or your head from your feet, etc. Every movement you do is a movement of *all* of you — that's the nature of tensegrity structures, all forces are distributed equally through the entire structure. And yet every day many of us pull and push parts of ourselves, using effort to move our legs when we walk, or to lift things with our arms, and so no. Treating each movement or activity as something one part of us is doing, rather than all of us.

The experience of effort IS the outcome of thinking of yourself as a collection of parts that need to be moved independently. Effort you feel in your body, like the effort of sitting upright, is simply a concentrated force, and as we've seen above in tensegrity there are no concentrated forces, they are all distributed evenly throughout the structure. If you think about what you're doing each time you feel effort, you're usually trying to use one bit of you at a

time. You're trying to 'pull with your arms' or 'push with your feet', and so on. You've split yourself up into bits, and the effort you then feel is the forces in your tensegrity structure being focused in some parts of you to allow you to separate that part of you out in that way.

Given Ingber's insights this all flows through to other systems of the body as well. For example your breathing is linked to every other part of you and will adjust itself accordingly at each moment to what you're doing. Having been a kid with asthma and having tried a whole range of 'breathing exercises' over the years, I can tell you that's a complete waste of time. Your breathing is in no way separate to everything else going on in your body and your activities around you. In fact when you experience yourself directly as a continuous, unified and distributed tensegrity structure, there is no noticeable separate activity called 'breathing' at all. No sense of any inhaling or exhaling, no sound of breath (what we often think of as the sound of breathing is really nothing more than the sound of turbulent air flow, from the overly forceful, deliberate sucking and blowing process we mistake for breathing).

Air enters and leaves your body, or can if you allow the process to act as it evolved to act, by a beautifully poised and automatic dynamic balance between pressure differences in your chest cavity and the entire atmosphere of the Earth, and the elasticity of your ribs and lungs and associated respiratory organs. But like many other things we do, we try to take that over and make it about sucking and blowing, fiddling with parts and exerting enormous forces on our exquisitely sensitive structures. Even traditions that work with breathing will exhort you to 'take a deep breath', as if that's something you *do*. But from my own experience if you just forget altogether that there is any such thing as breathing and move back out into your whole body and the world around you, when resting you'll be lucky to take 4 breaths a minute, and you'll only notice those if you do something like watch your chest moving, you won't hear or even feel it. That's deep.

Dissolving Divides

Tensegrity structures dissolve many taken-for-granted distinctions. For example the distinction between *structure* and *function*. Take a bridge as an example. A bridge has a structure that is visible,

made up of girders and struts and cables, or whatever its particular design may be. But its function is to carry things across some space, and if you're driving across that bridge you don't actually go anywhere near most of the structural elements. They're separate.

In a tensegrity structure the structural elements, like the elastic string and wooden rods in the toy shown earlier, act at the same time as the functional elements of the design. Your body is the same, there is no way for example that the structural constituents of your leg are separate to the actual functioning of your leg. The forces and 'structure' of walking *are* the walking itself — what your bones and muscles and tendons and ligaments are doing when you walk *is* 'walking'.

Another way to understand this is to notice that in traditional structures you have the structure, and then a variety of forces on the structure, in different places. In a tensegrity system on the other hand there are no distinct forces in this way, as all force is distributed evenly throughout the structure, and actually *erects* the structure. There is no real distinction between structure, and forces on the structure.

To use a further example, it's quite common to assume that there is an opposition between being supported in our bodies, and being free or relaxed. So in many of our activities we feel we need to make a lot of effort, after which we need to relax and 'let go'. So if you watch somebody sit for long periods in a chair for example, you will tend to notice that they alternately hold themselves up, and let themselves drop or slouch/slump. Effort and relaxation, alternately. Then they hold again, then they slump as they tire again. Etc. Like watching the pistons in an engine move up and down. Using your body as the tensegrity system it allows you to reject this yoyo dance completely, as you are supported, and *at the same time* completely free to move.

Plugging Into the World

It's fine to talk about the body, but human beings evolved in the world. So where does the world fit? This isn't always a major focus of tensegrity work. When we sense the world, when we smell or touch or see or hear, we are IN THE WORLD.

Perception extends the boundaries of our beings out

into the world. Again it's not us 'here' sensing things 'over there', here and there change all the time depending on what we sense. Sometimes I'm curled up in bed and my here or 'I' becomes an isolated point, not really involved in the world around me. At other times I'm wide awake and outside taking in the clouds and sounds and objects off in the distance etc., and 'me' is this much wider, potentially infinite space. If I send you a text message via mobile phone, my actions 'here' impact upon your phone 'there' as good as instantly, where there could be a metre away or anywhere on the planet. Does that mean my phone is just that block of glass, plastic and metal in my hand? No, because its physical functioning, what it displays, is immediately woven into a vast network of global electromagnetic waves that connect all phones (potentially) to all other phones, simultaneously. What electric current flows through my phone, what colours and text come up on the screen, what sounds come out of the speaker etc. are all dependent upon what other phones are doing when they connect to mine, anywhere in the world, at that time.

Our bodies are the same. What causes us to become erect and to move, and not just a slouched and slumped immobile ball, is being in the world. Perception is this being in the world, it immediately and automatically erects and animates our bodies. (To use more technical terms, sensation is always intrinsically sensory-motor. It's not sensation first and then motor action following, sensation and motor action are one and the same thing.) When you 'see' something, at that moment 'you' is that extended network or pattern of things stretching from your body and eyes right out to what you're seeing. There's no boundary between you and what you're seeing, that full space between your body and the object is 'you', in that situation. Look somewhere else and the response of every part of your body changes immediately, and 'you' become something different, right out to what you are seeing. Just as the behaviour of your mobile phone is dependent upon that wider network, out into the world, it's a device that doesn't work without that wider network.

This is why people often slouch in a chair, not because they're not holding themselves up in some way, but because they've become disconnected from what's happening around them. Their eyes glaze over as they withdraw into themselves, usually lost in their thoughts. Compare the average slouching human

with most animals — animals' eyes usually look alive and alert, constantly. Allow yourself to be aware of that world around you and you'll feel your body immediately and **automatically** expand towards what you're noticing. (Don't look, but see. Don't listen, but hear. Let the sights and sounds just be there with a completely passive eye and ear, and do the same for every other sense. Be in space.) In a way we're like marionettes waiting for somebody to pick up our strings and animate us, with that somebody being the world. But the analogy doesn't quite work, because puppetry suggests a separate puppeteer and puppet. Whereas the boundaries of ourselves are extended out towards the world around us we are engaged with, which becomes a part of our selves.

Awareness

Sensation is shadowed by something we all know about, but rarely pay much attention to — awareness. It can be difficult to find a real difference between sensation and awareness, as concepts they're often used to describe very similar experiences. In probably the most common use of the word, awareness is a sort of diffuse attention. For example, sitting here typing I'm aware of the couch next to me, but am not directly attending to it, that is, I'm not directly focused on the couch. So I'm paying attention to the computer as I type, but I have an awareness of the room around me at the same time.

Above we saw that perception is not really an act, but is the experience of our selves having no boundaries. Seeing, hearing and so on extend who we are, those sights and sounds and the spaces they form become part of us. Awareness is showing us this amazing truth, but we usually don't notice. There's something usually unnoticed about awareness. It's not you that is aware. Because you can also be aware of **you**. For example, when you're feeling cold, notice if your awareness of being cold is also cold. I bet it isn't. Your awareness of you isn't you either, you can be aware of those thoughts you would normally think of as you just as much as you can be aware of a couch. Which means *you are not your thoughts*. Awareness is non-personal, it is bigger than and outside 'you'. *Awareness is the experience of us and the world being one, indivisible thing*. Awareness has no actual centre, within us or outside us. The centre of awareness can be shifted to any point in the world.

As you perceive something you can allow your

awareness to expand almost infinitely, with practice, and you'll find that your experience will change from one of "me sensing something" to one of experiencing everything that's happening inside and around you, at the same time. The feeling of there being some privileged point, i.e. you, that everything else is being viewed from, disappears. At first as I type I take in the couch, then without losing that awareness I also start to feel my body in the chair, see the walls and roof, hear everything going on in the house around me and outside, all at the same time. Each new awareness gets *added* to what was there before, they all share the same moment, at the same time. Once the awareness has expanded like this there is no sense of here or there, no privileged central point, everything is happening at once and all those spaces are part of my experience. I even notice that what before I thought was me, that string of thoughts constantly going through my head, itself occupies a space within this much wider space, and is not the centre of it either. My experience of this full awareness notices these thoughts come up and go away again, just like it notices sounds as they arise and fall, or smells or sights, or even emotions and feelings. None of it is 'mine'. There is no me in that way.

Now that might sound a bit out-there in a New Age sort of way. But it's nothing like that. You will have had experiences matching what I just described before, you just may not have realised what it was you were experiencing. Say you were at a concert that blew you away, your experience of that concert was probably at times that fully immersive experience I described above, where everything was happening at once and there was no sense of some separate 'you' standing there taking it all in — it all just happened. You were 'in' the music', and in the mood of the crowd, and in the lights and smell of the place. All at the same time. Same when you've been in a cinema and the film was one you loved, I bet those couple of hours flew by and you were fully absorbed in the film — you didn't have a sense of sitting in a cinema staring at a screen at all. The film made you laugh, cry, feel scared — whatever. Your whole being expanded to take in what you were sensing in the film as well.

PART 2

How To Do It?

Describing the fundamental architectural principle that holds you together might be enough for some people to figure out how to put it all into practice. But driving a car is a different skill to knowing how a car works, and in the same way knowing about tensegrity structures doesn't mean you immediately know how to go about in the world acting as one. Although of course in another sense you can only act as a tensegrity structure, because that's what you are. This is more about acting in a way that works with that structure, rather than against it. There are different aspects of the experience of working as a tensegrity structure, and different descriptions will work for different people, or the one person may find that multiple descriptions help, all pointing to the same basic structure and function of their body. Over time you'll likely find ways to describe it yourself that work for you too.

This fully expansive being in the world takes all of the tensegrity and sensation and awareness characteristics described above and weaves them into a unified being in the world that can be you just going about your everyday activities. As you are out in the world seeing and hearing and so on, gravity is holding you out there without you having to go back inside yourself to try to hold yourself up or fiddle with other parts of you, for example. At times as you learn how to be in the world in this way, you may find yourself isolating one of these aspects and trying to 'do' it, like going about trying to feel the Earth come up under your feet. Nothing wrong with doing that, it's fun, but over time you need to be able to get on with things out in the world and ignore that, just implicitly using that upward support in what you do. Over time that weaving together into a single, unified, simple experience will become easier and easier, until it becomes just how you are and live.

To be able to use yourself properly as a tensegrity structure, it's vital to remember that it's not just about your body, but about the world that your body is a part of. Your body makes no sense at all without the world around you, where it evolved and which it's always a part of. As above being in the world is what animates our bodies, what makes them work. There are many 'bodywork' techniques for working with bodies, from basic exercise and gym work to yoga. You could do just about all of them and not realise there's a world at all. They generally want you

to 'work' this or that bit of you, in complete isolation from the everyday activities and environments we all live in. Even the best ones often talk about the body as a whole, but then cut it off from any sort of world, or allow it only to peer out at the world 'out there'.

You were born with a complete continuity between yourself and the world. So how should that feel? Your mind shouldn't feel separate to your body, and that combined mind-body shouldn't feel separate to the world. But those are just nice phrases — in practice what does it mean?

In practice it means a change to what it means to directly, 'physically' experience yourself. Everything from the head down becomes as much you as what you'd previously thought was you, i.e. your 'mind' up in your head. And out into the world around you, which becomes part of your larger, undivided sense of self. No parts, just all one thing, where there is no controlling point that directs all the rest. In particular no need to route all sensations and feelings through your head. They are just what they are, where they are.

At first you may try to make that happen by still sort of sitting up there in your head and reaching out to feel the other bits of you, and to 'look' out at the world with your senses as if you're still trapped up there in your head. Any time you get caught up trying to do it all a certain way, you'll know you're back in the divided thoughts/body/world place again. Sounds and sights and feelings in your body and your thoughts are just there, all at the same time. You can experience them just where they are, in space — you will *feel* and perceive them where they are, all at the same time (which means 'you' are that extended, continuous being which includes everything you feel in your body, and the world around you). It's an existential thing, not a thinking thing, you have to **experience** and **feel** the change, not work it out or think about it.

As you sit or stand there, or as you do anything at all, if you just *allow* all of the elements of your experience, from bodily feelings to sensations from the world around you, to simply be there, you will notice that it's all just THERE. You don't need to look or listen or do anything at all to feel and perceive yourself and the world around you, all together, all at the same time. No need to reach out from your head to be in your body or in the world,

the space and sensations and feelings are all there already, with their own spaces (learning to experience and directly feel *spaces* is a major part of this learning process). And it's all connected, all of this world is happening at the same time, and you can experience it happening at the same time with no central point running the show. The feeling of your feet on the ground is there at the same time as what you're seeing, and as your heart beats, and as the sound of the bird you hear, and as the thoughts you're thinking, and so on.

If we go back to the description of the body as a tensegrity structure, one of the crucial aspects of being a tensegrity structure to keep in mind is that *forces can't be concentrated or focused anywhere*. So as you sit or stand there, or as you do anything at all, if you feel some force anywhere in your body, like some tension in the back or shoulders or knees, or some weight, or some need to hold yourself up or use any sort of effort, you'll know straight away that the tensegrity structure is being misused. When you allow your tensegrity structure to work properly, your whole body/mind should feel like a single undivided thing, with no sense of weight or of parts or concentrated forces. *Feel* that single, continuous suit of muscle wrapped around you. You should feel like you're (because you are) completely effortlessly suspended in that wraparound suit of muscle, held aloft by gravity pushing up through your feet and into the rest of you. You can easily directly *feel* this, it changes completely the way you experience your own body. Rather than it being an arm here, leg there, torso here etc., with the need to pull and push each of these bits, or hold them up, you can feel the whole lot as just a single web of connected tissue wrapped around you.

Also feel that suit release as a whole in the direction you want to move, as described above. Not moving this leg and that leg, but the whole suit, all of you, at once releasing at the front of you as you move forward. No pushing or pulling but a releasing of elastic energy in those muscles that is already there. Or even if you want to raise your arm, let it release upwards as just part of that entire, single body suit. No need to lift it at all. This is the way hypnosis works when it gets people to 'levitate' their arm. It's not a trick, but it's also not a 'trance' state, but simply the person focusing their attention in a such a way that they stop trying to do things to bits of themselves and instead let their tensegrity suit release

them into movement in different ways. (Hypnosis produces a relaxed focus that stops you from 'doing' things and splitting yourself off from bits of yourself. But actually you can do all of that much more simply, and you do, every day.)

Thoughts are the biggest hurdle. They're the hardest parts of your experience to treat just as another part of experience, like a sound or smell. Time and again you'll probably find yourself living in your thoughts, and feeling like they are you. But they're not you. Open your eyes and ears and you're immediately in a space that doesn't need your thoughts — when you notice that you don't need to look or listen to see and hear things, you realise that your experience doesn't have to all be channelled through your mind or thoughts. In that moment you'll feel your thoughts sitting *alongside* what you see and hear, as just one other part of your experience. With their own space.

The Head Leads, The Body Follows

While your entire body/mind is a unified system, it has a preferential endedness to the way it's put together. Your head leads what the rest of you does. Your biology is constructed so that the rest of you automatically and effortlessly follows your head out into activities, as you see and hear and smell etc. (David Gorman's work again describes all of this brilliantly.) Your body literally releases continuously into activity as it follows your head into what you're doing. That's common sense, as you go about doing things as a whole person, your eyes and ears and other parts of your head need to be doing their thing, leaving the rest of you to do its thing. It's easy to reinstate a split in yourself by thinking that your head does one thing, and the rest of you does another thing that is directed from the head. So 'looking' and then at the same time trying to make your arms or legs or breathing do something else. In practice you overcome this split by letting your attention be out into the world, and then feeling the rest of you following that attention. You experience all of you in its following of your attention in what you're doing, in the same moment.

Some begin trying to do activities as a single, whole being by enjoying that sense of their head to toe being totally connected, but then they realise that the minute their attention shifts from that body out into the world and their activity again, they can't do that

and pay attention to their bodies at the same time. But that's the split again, their body can be in their awareness at the same time as their awareness is out in the world in what they're doing. And what they feel is that body following their head out into the world, that's what their body is doing at that time. So as you pour that cup of tea and are taking in the vision and sounds etc. of the teapot and cup, at the same time you can feel your legs supporting you and your arms pouring the tea, as they automatically follow your attention in what you're doing. No need for you to go inside and make those arms and legs and the rest of you do anything, they'll automatically follow your attention.

Looked at from a broader context, it's not so much that the head leads the rest of you as it is that the world leads what your 'body' does. It is your activities out in the world that animate your body, with the head being just one cog in the connected network of you-and-the-world. The connecting cog that takes your 'body' out into this world, although again it's one seamless thing, there is no you and no separate world. And all parts of this connected network are there at the same time, and can be experienced at the same time, in every moment. It can be tricky feeling your 'body' at the same time as your attention is out in the world, because of our habits of feeling that everything has to be routed through the head, because that's where we've normally felt that 'we' are. And it might seem like it's asking you to have your attention focused in more than one place at a time, i.e. on what you're doing, and on your body. But it's actually just one attention, spread out across that whole body-world continuum. It's a wide awareness.

Some Examples

There has been so much said and written about 'wholeness' over the years, even in respectable scientific ways, and yet hardly any of it ever gets to the common sense level of everyday life. Wholeness or undividedness has usually been described as something to try to get, rather than something we already have and experience in some (simple) ways every day.

To borrow one of David Gorman's great examples. Getting into and out of a chair are nearly always described as "getting up out of a chair" and "sitting down in a chair". But not all of you was in the chair

in the first place, so it doesn't make sense to say *you* are getting 'out' of the chair. For example *your feet* were never in the chair, they were on the ground. Nor was most of your legs or your head and shoulders. So these expressions describe a you that is just your torso, centred on your head, rather than a whole, undivided body. If you do cut yourself in half like that you will without a doubt experience standing as a getting up, as you try to lug the top half of you upwards. Similarly sitting will be a sitting down, as you drop that upper bit of you into the chair. But try it all again this time feeling yourself as a full body, and you'll notice that there's no sense of any getting up or falling down, but rather of your entire body moving from one supported shape (standing or sitting) to another (sitting or standing). Your body changes shape, but at no time is one part of it trying to pull the other part upwards or drop it downwards. Everything is working together.

To extend David's example a little further to bring the world back in, as an undivided being you also need to consider all of this from the viewpoint of the world around you. People generally don't use chairs just for their own sake, even as a single undivided person as described just now. They are in the world. They sit and stand for reasons that derive from that world. For example if I wanted to stand from the chair I'm in at the moment and go to the kitchen to make a cup of tea, my 'getting up' is part of a change to the whole context of what I'm doing. You could abstract the movement of my body out of that whole scene and say it's getting up out of a chair, but when you put the context back in it all starts to look very different. Every moment of that transition from sitting here to being in the kitchen is itself a fully lived reality with all of its own context — I shift my context of working on the computer to my awareness shifting out into the room I'm about to walk into, and then as I move from the chair each moment I am in that room and taking in what's happening around me, not just what my body is doing. And the same applies to every moment between here and the kitchen. There's always a surrounding context I'm a part of, a whole situation, not separate at all to what 'my body' is doing.

(Above I mentioned the idea of releasing yourself into movement, rather than pushing or pulling on bits of yourself. From this wider context perspective, the releasing is actually the process of you changing contexts. So you're not so much releasing your body

from one place into another as you're changing the whole situation you're living, of which your body is a part.)

But when we struggle and strain to 'stand up' or 'sit down' we strip all of that context away and suddenly become this little point up in our heads again, trying to pull and push the rest of us into various positions. We think we have to do that. But we don't; we don't have to leave the world we were in just a moment before to go inside there and do all that struggling and straining. We can just be in the world the whole time. And if we are then everything is completely effortless and 'does itself', because there's no separate person doing anything in the first place, just a continuously changing whole context that includes 'you'. A simple context like watching TV, or making a cup of tea, no mystical 'one-ness with nature'. That's what wholeness means, just you in the world, in everyday contexts. If I pour a cup of tea that's in no way separate from what my feet are doing, what I can hear, smell, what I'm thinking, the conversation I might be having — it's all happening at the same time. And if you don't withdraw from all of that and if you let it all happen at the same time, everything will be beautifully effortless and poised.

The Everyday

There are even bigger implications of allowing yourself to be part of the world. It's not just movement and posture and breathing and circulation (and so on) that can become effortless, needing nothing from you. And you won't just start to notice so many more things happening in your life through letting your senses do what they're designed to do. Being part of the world removes any need for the huge variety of existential decision-making we normally go on with. Being part of the world means not just what we sense and feel, but all of the events in our lives. So all the decisions we make every day, about anything you like, we often approach in that sort of controlling way we saw above is unnecessary with your body and posture/movement. We feel that we need to be in the driver's seat, making choices and decisions in our lives, to steer them. But you don't need to do that. If you allow yourself to be part of those events in the same way that you can allow sights and sounds just to be there, you'll find that you never need to sit back and 'think about things' at all. Events will just unfold in some way that works for you. That doesn't mean things will always turn

out well, because that's existence — it's not all good. But the 'right' response that you need to make in every situation will just happen, the 'answer' to things will just come to you and you'll find yourself responding in ways that just work, without having to work it out at all.

That sounds bizarre to some, I'm sure. We're so deeply in love with control that it seems ridiculous that we don't need to do that. If you work in an organisation the idea that you don't need to do extensive strategic and other planning to do the thing that is best for the organisation might seem outrageous. But time and again studies have shown that all that planning has no effect on the success of an organisation, and the ones that succeed are those that simply respond to events as they happen in the most flexible way. Planners like to paint that as "being reactive rather than proactive", but that's a false dichotomy. Reactive is the mirror image of planning — it's planning to do nothing. That's not *responding*, which is quite different. Responding is like allowing your body to be moved by events in the world around you, rather than trying to make it move. It's letting things unfold in the way that seems the right way, at the time. Not trying to guess what's going to happen and planning for it, but letting things happen and responding to them as they happen. That's not any more short-term than planning either, those responses can and do create changes to an organisation that go on for years or even decades. The same can apply to your everyday life at home.

(The title of this article of course refers to Milan Kundera's novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Kundera explores the age-old question of whether our lives have eternally recurring themes, and therefore have a heaviness of never being rid of things, or whether each thing that happens is always new, and our lives therefore have a lightness. But then also whether this lightness is unbearable because nothing lasts. Tensegrity and wholeness allow you to have both — they allow you a beautiful, meaningful (and therefore of course quite bearable!) lightness, in everything you do.)

You can take the same approach into completely different areas, like emotional problems. Say you suffer from anxiety or depression. Sufferers of these conditions live a separation of the feelings they experience from the context of those feelings. They

feel anxious or sad, and spend their days picking at those feelings. They've lost sight of the fact that feelings when working properly are part of a context. A person is sad *about* something, or anxious *about* something. They've lost the 'about'. If they start plugging those feelings into the situations they're actually living, they become almost immediately better, because it's suddenly plain that the feelings don't match the situations. (Been there myself, I'm not being glib.) Just as sights and sounds and thoughts are all part of a unified experience, so are emotions and feelings, if you let them be. And once you do, again there's nothing for you to do, you will automatically respond in the appropriate ways that match what those emotions and feelings are trying to tell you.

'Physical' conditions are the same. Just about every ache and pain when plugged back into the context of what you're doing at the time, rather than trying to push the pain away, will dissolve. That's because pain is the feeling of the body being stressed and trying to return itself to an equilibrium. Accept the pain within the context of what you're doing and your body does the rest. This has been proven to work even for extreme pain, such as for kidney stones. Try it, it's the last thing you would think of doing, but it works. That's what tensegrity structures do, they form systems within systems across multiple scales, which means any pain you feel in whatever part of your body can be linked to every other thing you're doing. A pain is a knot or tension somewhere in this network, and that added tension is at the same time the network trying to restore itself.

The Language of Wholeness

How we describe our experience is nearly always a completely accurate rendering of how we actually inhabit the world. Going back to the earlier example of 'getting up' from a chair, that way of conceptualising and describing the process is perfectly consistent with the pulling and pushing which then goes on. If you think that moving from a chair is about 'getting up', then that's part of a whole pattern way of doing that which will include all that struggling and straining and ignoring of the context of that activity.

Language is another part of the full patterns of our lives, and it's therefore no surprise that how we use it embodies how we act and feel. And there's a big extension of this fact.

Everyday language is the language of wholeness.

If you isolate where in our lives 'wholeness' happens, it's in the everyday experiences we have. That can include our work experiences, any activity that is part of our everyday living. There is an assumption that life has three rough layers:

- General, abstract
- The everyday, 'macro' level
- The 'micro' level

So as an example, going back to the earlier example of making a cup of tea. That 'making tea' is the level of you in the kitchen doing that which we all know and do all the time, the 'macro' level of common sense. But we assume that to that we could add a 'micro' level of the atoms in the tea and tea cup, and the organs and molecules in our bodies, and so on. And 'above' the everyday level we might assume we could have a general or abstract level of description of what's going on, and theories about how water boils and tea draws in a cup, and so on.

Each level has its own specific set of concepts and language. With the 'micro' we usually have 'technical' language, with scientific concepts about atoms and organs, etc. At the general or abstract level (and the micro itself is often called abstract, but in the opposite direction), you have general terms that summarise or encompass the situation and situate it within a much broader context of ideas. At the everyday level we have the language and concepts of the everyday, like "I'm making a cup of tea with this hot water".

It's the middle or everyday level where all the wholeness happens. *There is no more precise way to describe wholeness than everyday language and concepts.* For a variety of interesting reasons beyond the scope of this article, the two more abstract levels of the general and the micro are thought to somehow be more precise and contain the real essence or truth of the everyday situations we live in. But it's not true. (And in fact there are *no* levels, but again that's a different paper.) All of the wholeness happens in that everyday level of doing things, and you will never find a better or truer vantage point upon that everyday by jumping to either of the other levels.

The everyday seems too messy, too mixed and impure to be true in the way that abstract or technical terms seem to be. But that's because life *is* full of impure mixtures, and if you want to describe

them accurately there is **no way** to do it except for everyday language and concepts. They are perfect for the task, nothing can be more precise because then it wouldn't be part of the everyday.

It can take some practice to trust the everyday in this way. It's very common to feel that the truth of how things are is somehow 'beneath' or 'above' them, in those other levels. Providence in all its varieties. And when you practice acting in the world as a full tensegrity structure and as a being that is inseparable from the world, often you might find yourself falling for that, isolating out some piece of the whole and flogging it to death in your doing, or making it about some general principles. But that common sense, everyday level is where it's all at, it's in teasing apart simple phrases and concepts like 'getting up' that you discover the patterns you're living.

After all you live in the everyday world, and unless you 'get' this at that level, you're not ever going to be able to take it out into that everyday life. Every single time it seems complicated and about doing some method or technique, you've left the everyday and are missing the point. It will always be much more

simple than that. It will be about concepts like rushing, I'm heavy, I'm rushing, walking is something only my legs do, and so on. Those concepts capture it all perfectly, and allow you to understand from within the context of your lived life what's going on. 'Common sense' is just that — the common *meaning* for things. Their everyday, shared 'sense'.

Wholeness is not a mystical, to-be-attained 'state'. It's that seamless flowing life where we're just getting on with things without any sense of separation from ourselves or from what's around us, where we make the tea and don't even think about cups or water or tea, or our hands holding cups or our feet resting on the ground. That's why we call it '*making tea*' and not "*getting the cup out of the cupboard with my hands and arms while I stand on the ground with my feet, and boiling the water and adding the tea, and smelling the tea brewing, and getting out the milk and the sugar...*", and so on.

It's one seamless whole.

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## About the Author

**Nick Drengenberg** trained and worked as an engineer, before working as a teacher of high school students for almost 10 years. During this time he also trained in philosophy, and now works as an administrator at a University. He has two young children, and gets most enjoyment in finding the extraordinary in the ordinary details of life.

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