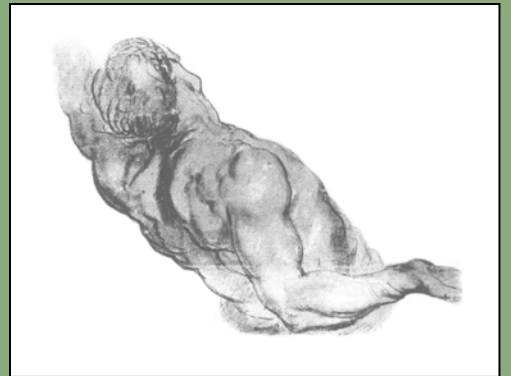


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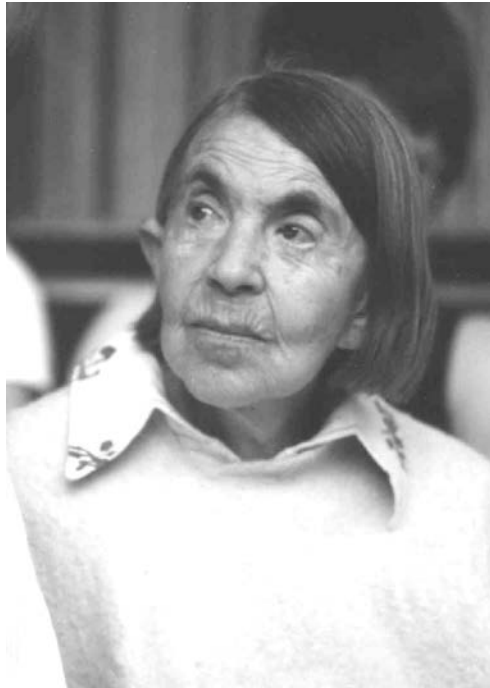


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## Charlotte Selver

Born April 4, 1901 – Ruhrort, Germany  
Emigrated to United States - 1938  
Died August 22, 2003 – Muir Beach, California

**“Becoming more and more able to be there in situations, whether easy or difficult; to be more there with our mind, with our hearts, with our sensitivities, with our strengths - this is very, very important.”**

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# Sensory Awareness and Graduate School: Reflections of a Grateful Student

Suzanne Kilkus, MA

## Abstract

This article offers reflections on a course in Sensory Awareness that was part of the graduate curriculum in a somatic psychology program. The student's perspective includes the effects of sensory awareness practice on personal and professional development, clinical practice and academic support.

## Keywords

Sensory Awareness – Santa Barbara Graduate Institute – Integrative Learning  
Synergistic Learning – Physical Sensation

In the fall of 2000 I began my PhD coursework with the Santa Barbara Graduate Institute (SBGI). I was a member of the inaugural class in the Somatic Psychology program. I had been a self guided student of somatic psychology in the context of my clinical practice as a therapist for many years. I had taken a number of trainings and personal development programs and wanted to formalize my studies with a PhD. One of the core courses of the program was Sensory Awareness (As the program has evolved, so has the content of this course and it is no longer in the form written about here). As I was attracted to SBGI due to their philosophy of integrative and synergistic learning, I imagined that an integral aspect of our coursework would be experiential. I was curious how experiential learning and academic rigor would be blended and how this course in Sensory Awareness, that ran through all three years of study, would impact my learning and support the development of our academic discipline. Having recently completed my coursework, I can say I experienced this core course as a strong foundation for the rigors of my academic experience, which involved over 24 hours of class per monthly weekend, an airline commute between the Midwest and California and the abundance of study and writing required for the 4 - 5 courses during each quarter. My intention in writing this article is to describe my process of learning in the Sensory Awareness (SA) classes, the effects this experience had on my personal and academic development as well as my clinical practice and to honor the work of Charlotte Selver and the teachers in her lineage. The reflections offered are chosen from papers written to describe the experiences of the classes.

During the SA class of the first weekend of courses, I became very aware of the state of my being. We were invited by our teacher to come to standing from our seated position and to take a half hour to do so paying attention to the sensory process. I found this to be a physically painful experience. About this I wrote, **“Throughout the whole weekend I felt physical resistance reflecting my ambivalence about being here. I had made a commitment to myself to pay close attention to my inner experience and to act authentically from it. In the past, in new situations, I might have pretended positiveness, acted on what I thought was socially expected of me or what might get social approval and say and do things I didn’t mean or intend. Listening to my body, being truthful about my ambivalence, and staying in contact with my sensations, painful as they were, kept me on the path of authentic action and new experience.”** During the month that followed these first classes of sensory awareness I noticed a change. **“Since that first weekend I have noticed a shift in my awareness of sensation. I have discovered another “room” in the house of my being. It is a room without walls, floors or boundaries of any sort. I name it as the room of unified experience with all life. In tuning into my sensate potential I am aware of oneness. In my years of meditating I have thought that it is through focusing in my mind that I experience oneness with all. I am discovering that through non-judgmental attention of physical sensation I touch into experiences of cosmic proportions. I now know that instead of transcending my body, I am entering body-being and coming alive, stepping into the universe and finding my ground.”** While sensory awareness can be experienced in any moment, I noticed at times there was a process of preparation and engagement with it.

After a few months of practice I wrote this. **“The invitation is nothing short of monumental. I travel halfway across the country to attend graduate school. I’m faced with academic and intellectual challenges that require significant energy and attention. I continue to make the transition from 22 years of professional practice to student life. But when I am faced with the invitation into sensory awareness, I feel my body erupt with fear and panic, my breath shortens and I think momentarily that I’ll never be able to do it. I’m curious about the unfolding of this little drama. Why, with so many other seemingly more demanding tasks at hand, would paying attention to my internal experience be so formidable?”** From this point on I found fear as an occasional and interesting companion in my practice. **“Being able to acknowledge and stay with fear, experience the panic and watch my thought process becomes part of the whole experience of tuning into my senses.”** Appreciation is an apt container for the process of awareness otherwise judgment and criticism will take up residence and draw attention away from the sensual life. I discovered that I could not be critical towards myself or others and sensitively engaged at the same time.

These reflections also included noticing the effects of greater sensory awareness in my life and studies. I made this observation. **“One powerful effect of my heightened sensory awareness is an increased ability to understand and**

integrate what I am studying. I read something and I take it into my whole body. I spend time with an idea or a practice and I somatically learn it. I was recently reading a piece about relationship as a spiritual path. The description used the metaphor of a stone dropped into a pond and the ripples created from that action. I not only held that image, I became the stone, the ripple, and the pond. I felt the wave action in my body; I experienced the boundlessness of a bottomless lake, the solidity and history of the stone. I knew the concept intellectually, and I lived it fully in that moment. To have my whole sensory experience available for learning on this level accelerates my learning, gives dimensionality to the materials, and produces creative ideas and processes. Potentials in me are being tapped and mined. My learning contributes to others learning in new ways. I'm experiencing what feels like a well of pristine water coming from a continuous wellspring deep in the earth of my body."

Contact and connections with others became rich palettes of colorful engagement. Out of an experience of non-verbal contact, while exploring the hand of another, came this reflection. **"In the conscious presence of another person, I expand who I am. Exploring with sight, touch, smell and feel, the hand of another, and then to have that reciprocated, was an insightful task of meeting and revealing. Touching without speaking activated core sensual connections. Being aware of myself while being aware of the other, who was being aware of me while being aware of himself, created the basic energetic dance of human existence. Poetry, art, literature, sculpture, music, and dance all formed in the moments of attending to the exquisite beauty of hand on hand, finger pads and life lines across palms. The common hand becomes a Michelangelo work of art, never to be seen and felt the same again."**

I paid attention to the variety of pathways to the consciousness of sensory awareness. A few months later out of a SA process of maintaining focus on myself while connecting with others, I observed, **"I felt an urge to leave my personal awareness, to distract my own discoveries with my search for others. I decided to continue somatic presencing out of a stronger desire to become as grounded in myself as possible so that all my actions came from authentic impulse and not reactive distraction. I noticed thoughts and fears of being "left out" as I heard others engage while I stayed with myself. My body began feeling solid, clear and responsive. And then I noticed an impulse from deep within for contact and began with opening my eyes and using sight to gently touch my friend across the room. It quickly grew into a joyous meeting of hands and hearts. From that point on any contact I made with another was sheer delight. I felt larger than myself each time I contacted another as the energy exchanged created something larger than the sum of our individual signatures. Laughter erupted from my belly and chest and there was a non linear sense of time as all moments became somatic connection."**

At this point in the chronology of my coursework, the tragic events of September 11 occurred. The inner resources I had developed through my sensory awareness practice were invaluable in the soul searching and meaning making I attempted at that time. I wrote, **"It is in my senses that I experience the deepest connections with life. This is my deepest longing and yet, I am quick to numb my senses as I attempt to make sense – cognitively – out of the events of the world. The weekend after the bombing when I couldn't attend classes, I read Pema Chodron's book, *When Things Fall Apart*. As I read I cried. Her words were jarring in their starkness and soothing in their comfort. I realize that my practice in sensory awareness is making me more human. It is giving me access to what makes me most human, my ability to feel life consciously from within. When I let myself cry with sadness and fear, grief and anger, I am fully in myself and I know on an ever deepening level that expanding my ability to do this contributes to the healing of all life around me."**

Sensory awareness practice alerts me to when I've used my body as a warehouse to store my daily experiences and invites me to redesign myself as a windmill, moving energy in and out in creative ways which in turn produces more energy for my use. Bringing this attitude and resource into clinical practice forms the quality of my contact with the client. Here is one session description. **"She walks into the room, dressed in brightly colored fall fleece. The hat covering her head could be indicating the coolness of the outdoor temperature, but we both know that it tells the story of hair loss from the year-long chemotherapy treatments from breast cancer. She has come to see me because she wants to "make friends with her breath." She describes the tangle she feels inside as her breath tries to find its way through the passage from the outside world to her inside world. She expresses dismay as if reporting struggles with a contrary child, an indication of her inner critic admonishing her for this effort. I notice that her breath is high in her chest, her shoulders are slumped over around her solar plexus and her lower back slouched in the chair protruding her abdomen forward. With her permission I ask her to begin noticing her breath without judgment – to ask her inner critic to stand down for the moment. She closes her eyes and turns inside. I ask her to sense her breath as it enters and leaves her body. I watch her shoulder tension ease as she visibly relaxes. She tells me the details of the streaming sensations, of the coolness as she inhales and the warmth as she exhales. With this description come more details of her attempts to take herself back out into the world as the new person she is in the aftermath of her cancer. The session unfolds from here as a weaving of somatic/sensory awareness, emotional coloring of her experience, her psychological understanding, and her changing perspective of who she is and wants to be."**

As I meet with clients I notice a change in my language, wanting to be more precise in my invitation to awareness. Where I use to suggest "observe", I now often use "sense" or "feel", and I notice a qualitative difference in the response I receive; which, in turn, leads deeper into the transformative experience being sought.

In addition my clinical presence is enhanced by my somatic awareness. **"I may begin with 'watching' my breathing, both from the outside and on the inside. That experience can best be described in metaphor. It's like watching the fire flame from a candle. I see the dancing movement and the heat rising from the tip of the flame against a reflected surface. When I shift my focus to sensing my breath, I feel the coolness of air pass into my nostrils, streaming along**

**my nasal passage, down the back of my throat. The inflation of my lungs stretches my torso. I feel the muscle fiber extend to its ends. As my breath deepens I feel slight tightness in my lower intercostals muscles as they stretch into their potential. After a few breaths, the tightness eases and the stretch feels elastic in its pull and contraction. I am inside the flame dancing. I am the heat rising. I am the fire burning. This is the difference between perspective and experience. Both of these aspects of human consciousness inform thought and action. Alone, perspective without experience is empty, cool, flat, and requires external validation. And experience without perspective can be chaotic, unconscious, closed to learning, and potentially discouraging. Integrate the two and I see and feel the fire. I know and dance the flame. I generate and enjoy the heat.”**

I am indebted to my Sensory Awareness teacher, Judyth Weaver, for her vision, patience, clear direction and guidance without an agenda. I know myself and live more vibrantly because of Charlotte Selver’s vision and unwavering commitment to the development of human potential through directly experiencing our lives through our senses. Her legacy lives on in each of her students and her students’ students. Sir Isaac Newton said that if we see farther it is by standing on the shoulders of giants. Charlotte Selver was a giant of heart, intention, focus and contribution. I am one of the many who are grateful for the nourishment of her life’s work.

#### Biography

**Suzanne Kilkus, MA**, has recently completed her coursework for a PhD in Somatic Psychology at the Santa Barbara Graduate Institute. She is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist having trained with The Family Therapy Institute of St. Paul, MN. She is certified in body centered therapy and relationship transformation with the Hendricks Institute in CA. She is in private practice in Madison, Wisconsin. You can reach her with comments at [heartspace@ameritech.net](mailto:heartspace@ameritech.net) or at 55 Waunona Woods Ct., Madison, WI 53713

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