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CHAPTER 9

CHANGING THE WORLD BEGINS WITH YOUR BODY

"If you don't understand yourself, you don't know anybody else."

NIKKI GIOVANNI

"Health is not simply the absence of illness. Real health is the will to overcome every form of adversity and use even the worst of circumstances as a springboard for new growth and development. Simply put, the essence of health is the constant renewal and rejuvenation of life."

DAISAKU IKEDA

As many researchers now believe, the ongoing violations of the Black body and heart have resulted in widespread trauma. This racialized trauma shows up as an array of adaptive but dysfunctional behaviors, including hypervigilance, heightened anxiety and suspicion, ADD/ADHD, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, and addiction. It can also appear as dysfunctional and non-adaptive behavior such as disordered thinking, difficulty concentrating,

panic attacks, learned helplessness, self-hatred, hopelessness, depression, and a survival reflex that tends to involve violence. As Joy DeGruy and others have noted, all of these are common symptoms of a pervasive and persistent stress disorder.

In many African American bodies, this trauma has led to a variety of physical problems, the most common of which are high blood pressure, diabetes, obesity, compromised immune systems, heart problems, digestive disorders, chronic inflammation, and musculoskeletal disorders. When we measure the health and lifespans of African Americans, the aggregate results are routinely poorer than for white Americans. For the past several decades, we've tried to address this one body at a time, primarily through medication, exercise programs, lifestyle changes, stress management, and other such strategies. These have had only limited success.

As any experienced trauma therapist will tell you, however, for anyone to genuinely address these health issues, the person needs to address the trauma that fuels them. Without that foundational healing, all other healing becomes difficult or impossible, because the body is still stuck in the trauma. This is not just the case for African Americans. White Americans and police officers need to mend their own trauma as well.

Each of these groups has serious health issues of its own (though, overall, the ones that afflict Black Americans are the most severe). For example, white women in America suffer from high rates of cancer.[61] Law enforcement professionals have unusually high rates of alcohol abuse, high blood pressure, anxiety, depression, divorce, and domestic violence. Many suffer from burnout; many take medical retirement. It seems likely that some of these health and social problems are related to underlying trauma that needs to be addressed if any real change is to occur.

Most of all, however, white Americans and police officers need to retrain their bodies to feel safe in the presence of African American bodies.

White-body supremacy—in all its forms—twists the meaning of a simple, self-evident reality: *There is something wrong with African Americans*. Of course something is wrong with many African Americans, in the same sense that you'd say, "Something is wrong with me" if you became sick or injured. What's wrong with many of us is that racialized trauma is deeply embedded in our bodies, constricting us and limiting our ability to live full lives. What's wrong is that white-body supremacy continues to violate the Black body and assault the Black psyche and soul.

We Black Americans need to heal this trauma and grow out of it, both individually and collectively.

There is also something wrong with most white Americans and law enforcement professionals, most of whom live with racialized trauma of their own. A key difference, however, is that white Americans also benefit from the system of white-body supremacy. They need to heal and grow out of their own trauma as well.

But there is another way to interpret the statement: "There is something wrong with African Americans." It can be read as "There is something inherently shameful, impure, and second-rate about being African American." This is, of course, patently untrue. But it is nevertheless deeply embedded in many American bodies—white, Black, and otherwise. Part of mending our racialized trauma will involve growing out of this intensely toxic idea. There is nothing second-rate or impure about African Americans. Something happened *to* us—and continues to happen to us. That "something" is white-body supremacy.

This brings us to the almost invisible way in which many white progressives discourage Black bodies, psyches, and hearts from healing. White progressives are deeply committed to the idea that there is nothing wrong with African Americans; that white and Black (and red and yellow) bodies are born with exactly the same potential; and that any differences in academic achievement, social skills, language acquisition, and so on must be entirely the result of social, cultural, familial, and educational influences.

Of course all of these play important roles in any young person's development. But many white progressives have reflexively resisted the evidence that many African Americans are impacted by racialized historical trauma created by white-body supremacy. White progressives have similarly resisted the evidence that a different—and also damaging—form of historical trauma is passed down through white American bodies. Until each of these manifestations of trauma is mended, it will continue to constrict people's bodies and lives and limit their efforts to grow and heal.

But as of this writing, many white progressives remain committed to interventions that ignore or dismiss the crucial role historical trauma plays in people's lives. Thus, paradoxically, they sabotage healing for many Americans of all skin colors, and unwittingly perpetuate the trauma. I hope they will receive these words as a loud wake-up call.

The place to begin the all-important healing of trauma is with the body. *Your* body. Each of our bodies. In Part II, we'll look at how each of us—white, Black, or otherwise—can better settle and manage our body. We'll also learn how to deliberately and mindfully activate it in situations that require it.

Healing does not occur in a vacuum. We also need to begin mending our collective body. This mending takes place in connections with other bodies—in groups, neighborhoods, and communities. In Part III of this book, we'll look at how healing can ripple outward from one body to another, and from groups of bodies into our systems and structures. This communal healing can help us steadily build respect, recognition, community, and, eventually, culture.

RE-MEMBERINGS

- The trauma held in Black bodies shows up as a wide array of physical problems and dysfunctional behaviors—all of which are common symptoms of persistent and pervasive stress.
- White Americans and police officers have their own common health issues, which are also related to underlying historical, intergenerational, and personal trauma.
- To date we have tried to address these issues one body at a time, and we have achieved only limited success.
- This is because we have not first focused on healing the underlying trauma. That healing is an essential first step.
- The place to begin that healing is in each of our bodies—starting with yours.

61 See https://www.cdc.gov/cancer/dcpc/data/race.htm.

PART II

REMEMBERING OURSELVES

CHAPTER 10

YOUR SOUL NERVE

"Take responsibility for yourself, because no one's going to take responsibility for you."

TYRA BANKS

My grandmother was a strong and loving woman. But her body was frequently nervous. She often had a sense that something terrible was about to happen. It was an ancient, inherited sensation that rarely left her—a traumatic retention.

She would soothe that sense of impending disaster in a variety of ways. When she was in the kitchen, she would hum—not a steady tone, but entire melodies. Her humming was never soft and intimate, but loud and firm, as if she were humming for an audience. As a small child, if I knew the song she was humming, sometimes I would hum along with her, and my body would experience safety and settledness.

She also frequently comforted herself by rocking, both forward and backward and from side to side. When I would watch her rock, it never looked nervous or neurotic. Instead, it felt like a sacred ritual, imbued with meaning and purpose. Sometimes she would hum as she rocked.

She had a well-used rocking chair, but she could also rock comfortably on any sofa, chair, or bed—or standing up. Once, when we were visiting a sick relative in the hospital, I watched her rock on an uncomfortable chair beneath a heart monitor.

Sometimes she let us grandkids sit on her lap as she rocked. When I close my eyes, I can still feel my body settling into her soft, thick arm holding me steady and safe across my chest, and the wavelike motion of being rocked, of becoming part of a flow.

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As I briefly noted earlier, most human behavior involves a part of the body that many people don't know about—the soul nerve. The soul nerve is the unifying organ of the entire nervous system. Health and mental health professionals call it the *vagus nerve* or *wandering nerve*, but I call it the *soul nerve*—a much stickier and more descriptive term.[62]

The soul nerve is not a nerve in the way we typically think of one. It is a highly complex and extraordinarily sensitive organ that communicates through vibes and sensations. This communication occurs not only between different parts of the body, but also from one person to another. Your soul nerve reaches into most of your body, including your throat, lungs, heart, stomach, liver, spleen, pancreas, kidney, and gut (both your large and small intestine). It is the largest organ in your body's autonomic nervous system, which regulates all of your body's basic functions.

The largest part of your soul nerve goes through your gut, which has about 100 million neurons, more than your spinal cord. This is why we sense so many things in our belly—and why some biologists call the gut our "second brain." This second brain is where our body senses flow, coherence, and the rightness or wrongness of things.

One of the organs your soul nerve does *not* connect to, however, is your thinking brain. It connects directly to your brainstem—your lizard brain.

We are only now beginning to understand how the soul nerve works. The organ itself was not identified until 1921, and much of what we know today was discovered only in the past two decades. There are a great many things about it we still don't understand.

We do know that the soul nerve is where we experience a felt sense of love, compassion, fear, grief, dread, sadness, loneliness, hope, empathy, anxiety, caring, disgust, despair, and many other things that make us human. When your body has an emotional response, such as when your stomach clenches, your voice catches, your pulse races, your shoulders tighten, your breathing quickens, your body braces for impact, or you have a sense that danger is lurking, that's your soul nerve at work. When you feel your heart opening or closing down; when you feel anxious in the pit of your stomach; when you sense that something wonderful or terrible is about to happen; when something feels right or wrong in your gut; when your heart sinks; when your spirit soars; or when your stomach turns in nausea—all of these involve your soul nerve.

When your body feels relaxed, open, settled, and in sync with other bodies, that's your soul nerve functioning. When it feels energized, vibrant, and full of life, that's also your soul nerve. When it feels tight, constricted, and self-protective, that's your soul nerve, too. And whenever you have a fight, flee, or freeze response, that involves your soul nerve as well. In fact, one of the main purposes of your soul nerve is to receive fight, flee, or freeze messages from your lizard brain and spread them to the rest of your body. Another purpose is precisely the opposite: to receive and spread the message of *it's okay; you're safe right now; you can relax*.

Your soul nerve is vital to your health and well being. It regulates your breathing, heart rate, and blood pressure. It helps prevent inflammation. And it can reduce pain, improve your mood, and help you manage fear.[63] We also know that your soul nerve is intimately involved with how your body interacts with other bodies, and with how your body makes memories. Without your soul nerve, you literally would not be human. But your soul nerve, like your lizard brain, has zero capacity to think.

Your soul nerve tells most of the muscles in your body when to constrict, when to release, when to move, and when to relax and settle. Much of this is outside of your deliberate, conscious control. However, as you will discover, with some attention and patience, you *can* learn to work with your soul nerve. With practice, you can begin to consciously and deliberately relax your muscles, settle your body, and soothe yourself during difficult or high-stress situations. This will help you avoid reflexively sliding into a fight, flee, or freeze response in situations where such a response is unnecessary.

The following pages provide simple practices in *soul nerve training*. They are foundational practices in noticing your body, helping it settle, and working with your soul nerve. They require no special skills or equipment, and they can be done almost anywhere.

Please don't just read through these practices. Actually *do* some of them, day by day, even if only for a minute or two at a time. You may be surprised at how beneficial they can be. For maximum benefit, do them with your eyes open, either standing up or seated comfortably, but with your back straight. You can also lie down for most of them, but you'll discover you may easily fall asleep.

Do these practices by yourself at first. Once your body becomes familiar with them, do them with other people as well.

To your thinking mind, these activities may seem simple, even primitive. But to your body, soul nerve, and lizard brain, they will be powerfully soothing and grounding. Eventually they can become second nature, feeling to your body much like comfortable clothing.

Most of these practices are ancient; some are thousands of years old. While our ancestors were largely unaware of the biomechanics of the soul nerve, they understood their own bodies. They learned—and taught their families and neighbors—what worked to help their bodies settle. They often did many of these practices together, and these communal practices helped to heal not just individual bodies, but families and other groups as well.

You'll recognize some of these practices as things I've described my grandmother doing; as things many small children do intuitively; as things parents often do with their babies; as things enslaved people did as they worked together on plantations; and as practices from many religions. Almost all of them have also been proven to work in controlled lab experiments.[64]

Your body, of course, does not give a damn whether a practice is ancient or modern, secular or religious, proven or unproven. It just wants to experience safety and security. At first, it's best if you practice the activities in a quiet, comfortable spot where you can be alone. As your body becomes more familiar with them, try to practice them in times of stress or difficulty as well. Eventually, those will be the times when you will *most* engage in these practices. You will use them to help settle your body, stay present, and remain connected with other people—even in the midst of pain or confusion.

If any of these activities triggers extreme panic or a fight, flight, or freeze response in your body, stop doing it. Before doing that activity again, I encourage you to find a safe, knowledgeable person to guide you through it—preferably a well-trained somatic therapist who works with trauma.

—BODY AND BREATH PRACTICES—

HUMMING

Focus your attention on the center of your belly, behind your navel.

Breathe in and out, deeply and slowly, a few times. Feel your belly pull the air all the way down into it.

On the fourth or fifth exhalation, hum a low, even tone.

Inhale naturally and repeat this a few times, varying your pitch with each new exhalation.

Do this for two or three minutes.

Then stop and notice what your body experiences afterward. What has changed from before you started humming? What has stayed the same? What sensations, thoughts, and images are arising?

What does your body want to do now? Does it want to move? Hum some more? Run and hide? Fight?

Without doing anything else, just notice whatever your body is experiencing right now.

Alternative: pick a song with a simple melody that feels comforting to your body. It can be anything—a hymn, a gospel tune, a lullaby, a military march, a punk rock song. Hum it all the way through from

beginning to end from your belly. When you're done, stop and pay attention to your body.

Feel free to experiment with a variety of tunes.

BELLY BREATHING

Focus your attention on the center of your belly, behind your navel.

Breathe in and out, deeply and slowly, a few times. Pull the air all the way down into your belly.

Keep breathing, deeply and slowly. Follow your breath as it flows in through your nose, down your throat, into and through your lungs, and into your belly. Keep following it as it flows back out again. (You won't actually pull air into your belly, of course, but it will feel that way.)

Continue breathing this way for four to five minutes.

Stop and notice what you experience in your body.

BUZZING

Get comfortable. Take a few deep, slow breaths. Focus your attention behind your navel.

Relax your shoulders. Rest your tongue gently behind the top row of your teeth. Relax your jaw and let your mouth hang open.

Breathe out slowly and firmly. As you exhale, make a buzzing sound, like a bee. Extend the buzz and the exhalation as long as you can without strain or discomfort.

Repeat for two to three minutes. Then stop and notice what you experience in your body.

Experiment with different tones, volumes, and vibrations until you find some that feel the most comfortable.

SLOW ROCKING

Get comfortable and take a few slow, deep breaths. Then, slowly rock your upper body from side to side, or forward and back.

If you like, play or hum a slow, soothing tune and rock to its beat.

Feel free to experiment with standing versus sitting; with rocking side to side versus forward and back; with a range of different (but always slow) speeds; and with sitting in a variety of seats and positions. Discover what feels best to your body.

When you are done, stop and notice what your body is experiencing.

Alternative: Keep your body still, but let your head and neck rock slowly from side to side.

RUBBING YOUR BELLY

Get comfortable and take a few deep breaths. Let your shoulders relax.

Place your palm on the center of your belly, just above your navel. Press in gently. Hold your hand in place for a moment or two.

Then, slowly rub your belly for three to four minutes, in whatever way feels good to your body.

When you're done, pay attention to all the sensations in your body.

You can do this with or without clothes, but remove any heavy outerwear.

Alternative 1: Rub the center of your breastbone.

Alternative 2: Rub your solar plexus—your center of gravity, halfway between your breastbone and your navel.

20's

Get comfortable. Slowly rotate your foot at the ankle twenty times in either direction. If you like, move it in one direction; pause for ten seconds; then rotate it in the opposite direction.

Do this with each ankle, one at a time, pausing for ten seconds in between each set of rotations.

Then do the same for each knee; for your hips; for each wrist; for each elbow; and for each shoulder. Pause for ten seconds after each set of rotations.

Sometimes trauma energy can get stuck in the joints. These rotations help to release that energy.

OM-ING

The vibration of the word *om* (or *aum*) has a uniquely powerful settling effect on the human body.

Get comfortable and take a few deep breaths. Let your shoulders relax.

Breathe in slowly and deeply. As you exhale, for the full duration of your exhalation, very slowly utter the word *om*. It will sound and feel more like *ohhhhhh-ummmmmm-muhhhhh*.

Pay attention to how your body vibrates to the sounds. Then breathe in and begin again.

Do this for ten long, slow exhalations.

When you are done, pay attention to whatever sensations you experience in your body.

SINGING ALOUD TO YOURSELF

Sing a slow, soothing song to yourself—perhaps a lullaby or a gospel tune—as you work, walk, drive, or exercise.

Afterward, notice what your body experiences.

CHANTING

Chanting usually involves repeating a word, phrase, or line over and over. Most chants contain a mantra, a prayer, a song, or a scripture passage. However, chanting appears to have a settling effect on the body no matter what you chant.

When you're finished chanting, stop and pay attention to the sensations in your body.

BREATHE, GROUND, AND RESOURCE

Take a few deep breaths. Let your body relax as much as it wants to.

Think of a person, an animal, or a place that makes you feel safe and secure. Then imagine that, right now, this person or animal is beside you, or that you are in that safe place.

Breathing naturally, simply let yourself experience that safety and security for one to two minutes.

Afterward, notice how and what you experience in your body. Slowly look around, including directly behind you, and locate yourself in the here and now.

You can do this standing, sitting, or lying down, with your eyes either open or closed.

TOUCHING YOUR DISCOMFORT

This final activity is an especially helpful way of teaching your body to settle during times of stress or difficulty.

Think of a moderately painful *but not traumatic* incident from your past.

Then, for five seconds—no longer, at first—focus your attention on a painful aspect of that incident. As you do, notice all the sensations in your body. Also notice what thoughts, images, and emotions arise—without responding to them in any way.

Without disengaging from that incident or from your body, practice breathing, grounding, and resourcing (from the activity above). Feel your body as it relaxes and settles.

Then let go of the incident from your past. Return to the here and now.

If a part of your body feels sore, or tight, or strange in some way, simply put your hand on it and support it for a few seconds.

Practice this activity every day or two. Over time, slowly increase how long you stay with the painful memory, until you are able to relax and settle while experiencing it for a minute or more.

The soul nerve is not just where we experience our emotions. It's also where we feel a sense of belonging. This is why we can think of it as both a bodily organ and a communal one. More than almost anything else, each of us yearns to belong. Within each human body is this deep, raw, aching desire.

Here is what makes white-body supremacy so pervasive and so intractable: *Beneath all the exclusion and constriction and trauma, white-body supremacy offers the white body a sense of belonging*. It provides a false sense of brotherhood and sisterhood, of being a part of something intrinsically valuable.

A variety of organizations, from the Ku Klux Klan to the NRA, have capitalized on this, offering quasi-community, a manufactured history, respected elders, cohesive symbolism, rules of admonishment, an internally

coherent (though toxic) worldview, and so on. White-body supremacy partly soothes white bodies in this way. But white-body supremacy also reflexively triggers the historical trauma embedded in those bodies.

African American bodies also feel a sense of belonging, of course. Ours, however, has its roots in necessity and an actual shared history. American police have their own sense of belonging, too, sometimes called the Blue Brotherhood. But there are many other ways to belong, and many other people and groups we can belong to. We can belong as family, as friends, as intimate partners, as neighbors, as countrymen, and as fellow human beings.

We will not end white-body supremacy—or any form of human evil—by trying to tear it to pieces. Instead, we can offer people better ways to belong, and better things to belong to. Instead of belonging to a race, we can belong to a culture. Each of us can also build our own capacity for genuine belonging.

The next two chapters are about building this capacity. You will learn to feel deeper into your own body, and then to harmonize it with other bodies. When practiced by enough people, these simple, primordial activities can begin to change the world, body by body.

RE-MEMBERINGS

- The soul nerve is the unifying organ of your entire nervous system, reaching into your throat, lungs, heart, stomach, liver, spleen, pancreas, kidney, and gut.

- Your soul nerve is where you experience a felt sense of love, compassion, fear, grief, dread, sadness, loneliness, hope, empathy, anxiety, caring, disgust, despair, and many other things that make us human.

- One of the main purposes of your soul nerve is to receive fight, flee, or freeze messages from your lizard brain and spread them to the rest of your body.

- Another purpose is to receive and spread the opposite message of *it's okay; you're safe right now; you can relax*.

- Your soul nerve is intimately involved with how your body interacts with other bodies.
- Your soul nerve tells most of the muscles in your body when to constrict, when to release, when to move, and when to relax and settle.
- With some attention and patience, you can learn to work with your soul nerve—consciously and deliberately relaxing your muscles, settling your body, and soothing yourself during difficult or high-stress situations.
- Over time, with further practice, you can also learn to use your soul nerve to activate and mobilize your body on demand.
- Your soul nerve is also where you feel a sense of belonging. More than almost anything else, each of us yearns to belong.
- Beneath all the exclusion, constriction, and trauma, white-body supremacy offers the white body a sense of belonging, a false sense of brotherhood and sisterhood.
- We will not end white-body supremacy—or any form of human evil—by trying to tear it to pieces. Instead, we can offer people better ways to belong and better things to belong to. Each of us can also build our own capacity for genuine belonging.

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62 Psychiatrist Stephen Porges has done much of the pioneering work on the vagus nerve. To learn more about this all-important organ and how it makes us human, check out the many articles and YouTube videos for non-professionals online. My discussion of the soul nerve in this book is, of necessity, greatly simplified.

63 I won't go into all the physiology behind the health benefits. Simply know that it involves a variety of electrical signals sent to and from the vagus nerve, increased oxygenation of the blood, a drop in blood pressure and heart rate, increased airflow in and out of the sinuses, and other measurable body responses.

64 For example, the benefits to the body of chanting "OM" were studied, confirmed, and reported in Bangalore G. Kalyani, Ganesan Venkatasubramanian, Rashmi Arasappa, et al.,

"Neurohemodynamic Correlates of 'OM' Chanting: A Pilot Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging Study," *International Journal of Yoga* 4, no. 1 (2011): 3–6.

CHAPTER 11

SETTLING AND SAFEGUARDING YOUR BODY

"Breathe. Let go. Remind yourself that this very moment is the only one you know you have for sure."

OPRAH WINFREY

"Healing is a practice. It's not a one-time thing or an idea. If I get up and do a bunch of exercises and repeat them, over time my muscles will get stronger. Healing is a practice just like that."

MARNITA SCHROEDL

Few skills are more essential than the ability to settle your body. If you can settle your body, you are more likely to be calm, alert, and fully present, no matter what is going on around you. A settled body enables you to harmonize and connect with other bodies around you, while encouraging those bodies to settle as well. Gather together a large group of unsettled bodies—or assemble a group of bodies and then unsettle them—and you get

a mob or a riot. But bring a large group of settled bodies together and you have a potential movement—and a potential force for tremendous good in the world. A calm, settled body is the foundation for health, for healing, for helping others, and for changing the world.

I'm a therapist by profession. I've been trained by many wise elders and other professionals; I've earned a Master of Social Work degree; I know a variety of practices such as talk therapy, EMDR, and multiple forms of healing touch. If you paid me to, I could discuss your inner child, your internal archetypes, your ego and superego and id, Gottman's seven principles for a happy relationship, or any of a hundred other concepts therapists use. Yet none of these has much to do with why clients come to me, or how our work together helps them heal.

Although they don't always realize it, people visit my office to be with my settled, regulated nervous system. At first, clients come in with dysregulated nervous systems. Over time, their repeated contact with my nervous system helps their nervous systems settle. This does not happen through a process of mirroring, or cognitive training, or verbal communication. What takes place is energetic, chemical, biological—a synching of vibrations and energies. My nervous system does not model the way; over time, it helps other nervous systems access the same infinite source that mine does.

My settled nervous system isn't an accident of birth. It's partly the result of my training, my education, my experience, and my longstanding and mindful self-care.

But I didn't wrestle or mold or manage an unsettled nervous system into a settled one. Over time, I learned to access a settledness that is always and already present. I usually call it the Infinite Source, but it doesn't require a name, or an explanation, or a belief.

This settling of nervous systems, and this connection to a larger Source, is vital to healing.

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If you're white, you may discover that when you can settle and manage your body, you won't feel a need to manage Black ones—or a need to ask

Black ones to manage yours. You'll also be better able to manage, challenge, and disrupt white-body supremacy.

If you're Black, you may find that when you can settle and manage your body, you'll be better equipped to not internalize the standards of white-body supremacy. You'll also be more able to challenge it through organized and sustained resistance.

If you're a police officer, you may realize that when you can settle and manage your body, your job will be less stressful. In addition, many of the bodies you encounter will seem less threatening. Some of the law-abiding people you serve and protect may also feel less threatened by you. In addition, you may get sick or injured less often.

In each of these cases, you will discover that when you have regard for your own body, it is easier to have regard for other bodies.

Learning to settle your body and practicing wise and compassionate self-care are not about reducing stress; they're about increasing your body's ability to *manage* stress, as well as about creating more room for your nervous system to find coherence and flow. The activities you'll learn and practice in this chapter won't make your commute shorter, your boss more empathetic, or your child less self-centered. But they will help you be less resentful or reactive when your commute, your boss, or your child makes your life more difficult. As a result, you will lose your cool less often, and stressful situations will be less likely to trigger a fight, flee, or freeze response. In turn, you may develop stronger and more respectful relationships with your fellow commuters, your boss, and your child.

Settling is *not* the same thing as healing; it is an all-important foundation for healing. A settled body invites and accepts efforts to mend it; an unsettled one tends to resist those efforts.

Unfortunately, some people learn to settle their bodies, but misuse that ability. Instead of inviting and accepting healing, they use settling in a neurotic way, to *avoid* healing. When they face a conflict or difficulty, they don't settle themselves and then work through the clean pain. Instead, they flee the situation, and then partly soothe and settle their bodies with meditation, prayer, yoga, hiking, and so on. They use settling as a form of dirty pain, rather than as support for moving through clean pain. (There is nothing wrong with any of these practices. In fact, I often recommend them. For most people, most of the time, they are healthy. But when someone uses

any activity to avoid growing up or facing clean pain, it's my job as a therapist to call him or her on it.)

Others, in an effort to avoid anxiety and hypervigilance, over-settle their bodies into a state that resembles depression. This, too, can be a flight response.

The activities in this chapter all focus on the body—*your* body. They are not mere exercises in relaxation, mindfulness, or learning to feel good. They are ways to better know, experience, and understand your body. They will make you more aware of your soul nerve, how and where and when it activates, and the many emotions it gives rise to. Most of all, they will help you develop the ability to settle your body whenever you wish.

Try not to view these settling activities as tools to be used only when you're under stress or feeling anxious or upset. These practices are nourishment as well as medicine. Do at least two or three of them regularly—ideally, every day or several times a week. If you like, rotate among several different ones.

Each person's body is unique, so some activities will work better for you than others. At your leisure, test each one. Use the ones that work and feel good; ignore the ones that don't. If an activity stops working or feeling good after doing it for some time, then switch things up. In all of these activities, however, you will learn to slow down, notice your body, and soothe yourself.

The central feature of any trauma response is speed. It has to be; otherwise, in the presence of genuine danger (for example, a snake about to strike), your body wouldn't be able to protect itself in time. This is why, in order to work through your trauma, you need to learn to slow down, reach for an internal resource, and fully experience your body through your soul nerve.

At other times, of course, your body needs to activate rather than settle. It's not that settling is good and activation is bad; each of us needs to be able to do either one on demand, based on the needs of the moment. With practice, these and later activities will help you settle your body *or* activate it whenever you need to.

I recommend initially practicing each activity in a quiet, comfortable, private space, as you did in earlier chapters. Once a practice has become familiar to your body, however, begin using it during difficult moments—including when other people are present.

—BODY AND BREATHING PRACTICES—

BREATHE, GROUND, AND RESOURCE, REVISITED

This is a new way to use an activity you practiced in Chapters 2 and 10.

Take a few deep breaths. Let your body relax as much as it wants to.

Think of a person, an animal, or a place that makes you feel safe and secure. Now imagine that this person or animal is beside you right now or that you are in that safe place.

Breathing naturally, let yourself experience that safety and security for about a minute.

Feel into your body. Where does it seem constricted, uncomfortable, or unwell in any way? Note each of these locations.

Pick one of these locations and focus on it. For a few seconds, let yourself fully experience the constriction or discomfort.

Then, once again, visualize the person, animal, or place that helps you feel safe and secure. Imagine you are in that place or that the person or animal is beside you. Experience the safety and security for a minute or two.

Do this for each part of your body that feels uncomfortable or constricted.

COMING INTO THE ROOM

Sit comfortably in a chair. Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths.

Imagine you're floating in space. Below you, planet Earth turns slowly. Watch it turn for a few seconds.

Slowly descend until the part of the country you're in fills your field of vision. Stay directly above it, like a GPS satellite, so that it doesn't move beneath you.

Keep descending until you're looking down on whatever city, town, mountain, valley, or other area your body is sitting in right now.

Continue your descent until you're looking down at the top of the building you're in. If you're seated outdoors, descend far enough so that you can see your own body below, as if you're viewing it from a helicopter.

Keep dropping slowly and steadily, until you can see your body in detail, as if you're about ten feet above it. Observe your body's posture, any movements it makes, and the clothing it's wearing.

Slowly and smoothly, descend the rest of the way, and slip inside your body.

For a few breaths, simply be aware of being in your body. Relax and let the chair support you.

Then notice the sensation of the chair against your legs and thighs.

Then notice how it feels against your back.

Open your eyes. Orient yourself by looking around you, including behind you. Return to the here and now.

BODY SCAN

Sit comfortably in a chair. Take a few breaths, feeling the air move in and out of your body. Close your eyes.

Notice the experience of the chair against your back. Notice the sensation of your feet on the ground.

Starting with the top of your head, slowly scan your body from top to bottom. Pay attention to each part as you slowly move your attention downward. Notice where there is pain or discomfort, where there is constriction, and where there is relaxation or expansiveness.

First move slowly down your forehead, then through your face, then down your neck.

Follow your attention as it moves across the top of your shoulders and onto your shoulder blades, then down your torso and into and down your arms.

Continue to descend down your torso and arms, through your hips and buttocks, and into your hands. Experience your attention spreading into your fingers and then out your fingertips.

Continue moving down your legs, through your knees, and down to your ankles. Pay attention to your major joints—your ankles, knees, hips, wrists, elbows, and shoulders. These are spots where energy often gets blocked. (If you feel the urge to move any of these, feel free to do so.)

Follow your attention into your feet, then down into your toes, then into the bottoms of your feet.

Take a moment to notice where your soles meet the ground.

For a pleasant and effective variation of this body scan, practice it standing in the shower, as you let the water surround and cleanse you.

SQUEEZE AND HOLD

Stand or sit comfortably. Take a few breaths.

Feel into your body. Where does it seem constricted, uncomfortable, or unwell in any way? Note each of these locations.

Then, one location at a time, gently press your hand against the uncomfortable spot, as if you are holding it lightly in place.

For thirty to forty-five seconds, simply experience that gentle pressure.

Then rub the spot, slowly and gently. If this feels good, keep rubbing for thirty to sixty seconds. If it doesn't, stop.

Next, *gently* squeeze and hold that spot. If squeezing it feels good, continue for thirty to sixty seconds. If it doesn't, stop.

Do this for each part of your body where there is pain, constriction, or distress.

Use this activity whenever a part of your body feels uncomfortable.

FINGER BALANCE

For this activity, buy what's called a *balancing bird*. Google those two words and you'll find a lot of options. Get one that's four to seven inches long; you should be able to find one for a dollar or two. (Prices range widely, but all models have the same basic design.)

Hold out your hand with the palm up. Keep your index finger extended, but curl the rest of your hand into a fist.

Place the beak of the balancing bird gently on the tip of your index finger. The beak will be no wider than a pencil point.

If you keep your hand still, the bird will balance perfectly on your fingertip. The bird will seem to defy gravity and float in place.

Continue to let the bird balance on your fingertip for thirty to sixty seconds, keeping your attention focused on it. If you like, move your hand in small, slow circles while the bird stays balanced.

These birds are more than just cool toys. They can have a profound focusing and settling effect on the body. I first learned about them as part of my training as a somatic therapist.

If you like, carry the bird in your purse or pocket. In moments of stress or difficulty, pull it out and balance it on your finger for a minute or so. (But if you want to be left alone, don't do this in public. There's a good chance someone will come over and say, "Wow, that is *awesome*.")

SOOTHING YOUR HANDS

Find an oil or lotion that smells good and feels good on your skin. This doesn't have to be anything special; many people use olive oil or hand lotion.

Get comfortable. Focus your attention on one hand. Then, very slowly and mindfully, rub it with lotion or oil. Apply it to your fingertips; then to the rest of your fingers; then to the spaces between your fingers; then to your palm; then to the back of your hand. Spend fifteen to twenty seconds slowly and gently rubbing it in.

Notice how each part of your hand feels as the liquid first touches it, then spreads across it, then gets rubbed in.

Now do the same for your other hand.

Safeguarding your body requires self-regard and soft, wise, and compassionate self-care. Caring for your body supports its health, its healing, and its settling. A well cared for body also tends to feel better.

The suggestions on the next few pages will help you create and follow your own self-care *growth routine*. Because each body is unique, there is no one-size-fits-all program. Experiment with different variations and combinations until you find a growth routine that feels good and that you can easily follow day after day. It's best not to be too ambitious at first.

Begin with modest changes; then make gradual additions and adjustments over time.

The elements of an effective and gratifying growth routine are:

- ***Enough sleep.*** For most people, this means seven to eight hours a day; some people need more. Getting sufficient sleep can improve your concentration and memory, help you maintain or lose weight, improve your mood, and bolster your cardiovascular health. Many people find afternoon naps—even brief ones—especially rejuvenating.

- ***Good nutrition.*** Eat mostly fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and lean proteins. Replace most of the fats in your diet with olive oil and/or butter. Avoid refined sugar and highly processed foods. Limit your daily alcohol consumption to one to two drinks and your caffeine intake to two regular-size coffees or teas. Take healthy supplements.[65] And check your tolerance for gluten by not eating it for a week or two; many of my clients experienced big health improvements when they stopped eating it.

- ***Enough water.*** Most Americans are chronically dehydrated. Monitor your water intake and make sure you drink at least eight to nine cups a day.

- ***Regular exercise*** (at least thirty minutes a day, five days a week). Physical exercise can increase your resilience, strengthen your heart, improve your mood, release endorphins and other feel-good chemicals, reduce tension, and support your overall physical and mental health. You don't have to join a gym or buy special equipment or outfits; brisk walking, swimming, biking, and/or jogging are all excellent. Just taking a two-mile walk five days a week can make a profound positive difference. If you're over fifty, I also recommend half an hour of strength training twice a week.[66]

- ***Simple pleasures.*** Each and every day, do at least one small, simple, soft thing that feels good to your body: do yoga, watch the sun rise, dig in the garden, play your guitar, take a walk with a friend, or do

anything else that brings you joy. To ensure these simple pleasures become a regular part of your life, build them into your schedule.

- ***Some form of meditation, prayer, or chanting.*** This can be secular (for instance, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction), religious, or somewhere in between (such as insight meditation or Zen meditation). I recommend doing this for twenty to forty minutes a day—if possible, in the morning.

When your life is particularly stressful or uncomfortable, you will be tempted to abandon your growth routine. Don't. Do just the opposite: *strengthen your growth routine*. Get an extra thirty to sixty minutes of sleep each day. Eat as healthily as possible. Temporarily avoid all alcohol. Make a point to enjoy a couple of extra small pleasures each day. Be gentle and soothing with yourself. Wear soft, comfortable clothing. Hang out with gentle, friendly people. Spend more time with a loving pet. Listen to music that settles your body. (It doesn't have to be soft and gentle—gospel, country, folk, jazz, and even some R&B and rock can all have a settling effect. If you feel into your body, you'll notice which artists settle it and which ones don't.) The additional support will further strengthen your body's resilience and its ability to settle.

If you're not already convinced of the value of a growth routine, here's what I want you to do: Create a routine, try it for a month, and pay attention to what your body experiences. Then, for the month after that, deliberately *don't* follow the routine. Do whatever you want, whenever you want (so long as it's legal and ethical). Pay close and regular attention to what your body experiences. At the end of that second month, compare your body's responses.

Here are some other helpful guidelines for keeping your body healthy and resilient:

- ***Avoid all forms of tobacco.*** Even smokeless tobacco can damage your body. Anything more than a celebratory cigar once or twice a year is too much.

- ***Monitor and limit your drug use.*** Use prescription drugs carefully. Be alert for drug interactions—the side effects of taking two or more

different drugs at once. When taking any medication, use as little as possible to get the desired effect. Avoid recreational drugs in general; some, such as cocaine and marijuana, can impair your judgment; others, such as meth and heroin, can injure or kill you. (If you have strong cravings for drugs and/or alcohol, this craving may point to unhealed trauma. It may also offer a clue as to how and where that trauma got stuck in your body.)

- ***Reach and maintain a healthy body weight.*** You don't need to be thin to be healthy, but if you're carrying around more than ten to twenty extra pounds, that excess weight puts a strain on your breathing, heart, joints, and spine. If you're heavy, losing even a few pounds may dramatically improve your health.

- ***Notice if you fall into a negative feedback loop.*** A vicious circle of habits can steadily erode your health. Imagine, for example, that you regularly drink coffee at dinner. As a result, you have trouble falling asleep, so you're tired during the day—so you drink more coffee with dinner. Because you're sleep deprived, your performance at work suffers, and you're sometimes irritable with your kids. If you notice you've slipped into a negative feedback loop, deliberately strengthen your growth routine, and change your habits and schedule to break the negative pattern.

- ***Pay attention to your body***. If it doesn't feel right, ask yourself, "Is there something I'm doing—or not doing—that's causing me to feel this way?" Then change that habit or behavior for a few days and see what happens. If you feel better, consider making the change permanent.

- ***Visit your doctor and dentist regularly.*** Get a physical once a year, an eye exam (for both health and vision) once a year, and a dental check-up every six months. These will help you head off potential problems and catch current problems early. (Under US law, your health insurance policy must pay for both your annual physical and your annual eye exam, and neither exam is subject to your deductible.[67]) If you don't feel well for more than two weeks, or if

you have some other health symptom that lasts that long, have a physician check you out.

Caring for your body, your psyche, and your soul is not optional. It's crucial to your health, sanity, happiness, and healing, and it is an essential part of being human.

One final point: If you are currently experiencing new or repeated trauma, the best thing you can do to care for your body, psyche, and soul is to *stop the trauma*. Usually this means removing yourself from the situation that creates it. This isn't always possible, of course. Often toxic stress is unavoidable. Your home is destroyed in a hurricane. Your best friend dies. Your partner suddenly and unexpectedly leaves you. In these situations, use the practices in this chapter to settle your body, maintain or strengthen your growth routine, and care for yourself as well as you can.

RE-MEMBERINGS

- Few skills are more essential than the ability to settle your body. When you can settle your body, you are more likely to be calm, alert, and fully present, no matter what is going on around you.
- A settled body also enables you to harmonize and connect with other bodies around you—while encouraging them to settle as well.
- A calm, settled body is the foundation for health, for healing, for helping others, and for changing the world.
- Learning to settle your body is *not* about reducing stress. It's about increasing your body's ability to *manage* stress.
- Settling is not the same as healing; it is an all-important foundation for healing.

- A settled body invites and accepts efforts to mend it. An unsettled one resists them.
- The central feature of any trauma response is speed. In order to work through your trauma, you need to learn to slow down and feel into your body, using your soul nerve.
- The ability to settle *or* activate your body on demand is essential for healing trauma.
- Safeguarding your body also requires wise and compassionate self-care. This includes:
    - Getting enough sleep
    - Good nutrition
    - Drinking enough water
    - Regular exercise
    - Enjoying simple pleasures
- When your life is especially stressful or uncomfortable, strengthen your growth routine.
- Caring for your body, your psyche, and your soul is not optional. It's crucial to your health, sanity, happiness, and healing and it is an essential part of being human.

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65 I'm a therapist, not a physician or nutritionist, so I can't recommend specific supplements. However, I've seen many people's mental and physical health improve when they followed a growth routine and took some or all of these supplements under the guidance of a qualified nutritionist: a food-derived multivitamin, a food-derived B-complex vitamin, vitamin D3, magnesium, CoQ10, and flaxseed oil.

66 Before beginning any new exercise routine, consult with a physician.

67 This applies as of August of 2017. The law may have changed by the time you read this.