

Climbing Stairs

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My right knee clicks when I climb stairs. It's been doing this for a few years, gradually working its way into my consciousness. When I think back, it's always seemed a little loose at the joint, popping a bit at times when I stretched it. I kind of liked the sound and the feeling of opening space.

But now, in my fifties, my experience of my knee has shifted from kind tolerance for some idiosyncratic expression of my body's character to a growing alarm. This summer, when running up hills I began to feel sharp pains in my knee. I imagined that the edge of the meniscus was being pinched. When I returned to practicing Tai Chi after several months I was shocked to feel my knee clunk alarmingly when I did movements that shifted my weight sideways, from one leg to the other. My knees had caught my attention.

Yet, somehow, with all the skills at my disposal, I could never seem to find time for my knee. I knew my hamstrings were short, that my quads were tight. I had definite indications that pointed towards some form of patellofemoral syndrome, not least of which was the grinding and uneven tracking of my knee cap. It was as if I was stuck in an inevitable, degenerative process that I could only be aware of with a quiet horror. Then, in a bodywork session with Kiri, she made a comment about how I seemed less connected to my tissues the further down my legs she worked. Over the next few days the observation slowly worked its way into me.

One morning I woke early, feeling the stiffness in my legs, the discomfort in my kneecap. I felt the frozenness in my body that would not allow me to move. The only part of myself I had access to was my brain. I thought, "What is this?"

As I was able to bring my awareness to the parts of my experience, not just experiencing them but being present to them, I began to feel a little bit of freedom. The "noticing" parts of me began to have access to other functions of being present such as asking, "how do I need to be with this?" My hand responded, finally able to reach down to my knee. I began to explore my kneecap.

The probing of my touch, feeling into the crevices on each side of my knee cap, taking in the experience of the textures of the bone and surrounding tissues began to awaken my imagination of how the patella fit into the groove between the knuckles of the femur. I began to slowly flex and extend my knee, exploring the movement of the knee cap in the groove. Shifting my intention to wondering, "how does it want to go?", my hands moved easily to the back of my thigh as I extended my knee towards the ceiling, feeling the stretch on the tension in my hamstrings. Holding my intention to receive the awakening movement response in my leg, I felt my knee entering the crunching territory as I straightened my leg with my heel towards the ceiling.

"How does it want to go?", I asked again, and felt the focus of the pressure move away from the lead of the heel and into the hamstring. Moving the back of my thigh into my hands I felt

support and the crunching began to ease out of my knee. I was beginning to feel the glimmer of hope.

Later morning, climbing the stairs the crunch was back. I slowed down. It was still there. Finally with some resentment, moving at the speed of a sloth, I began to feel into the edge of the crunching territory. There was an edge of resistance so I waited, stopped in time in the midst of a step. At first, nothing happened. I felt an impatience: Let's move on; I can't stay here all day. Then I began to feel a pain deep in the groove under my knee cap. And with it I felt fear. My impatient need to move on had turned into the primitive urge to flee.

Gently easing in and out of the resistance, the pain and fear began to recede and other sensations arose. I felt burning in my quads. My lower back and neck began to lengthen. My hip joint began to open and swivel my thigh outward. As these reorganizations of my body began to occur the burning in my thighs began to recede and my leg began to slowly but of its own volition straighten at the knee - without crunching. Slowly, a hesitant expectancy of disappointment mixed with hope that I might experience the phenomena again, I took the next step. The clicking had substantially faded away.

The next time I climbed the stairs, the clicking was back. But now I had moved beyond hope to interest. Here was something to explore. I began to look forward to stairs as an opportunity to pause for a moment and explore my knee.

As it is wont to do, the universe began to respond to my increasing awareness. A couple of days later I was walking through a medical clinic and noticed an rotating TV ad for 10 healthy activities in everyday life on the screen in the waiting room. Of course, the particular activity that showed up as I walked through the waiting room was climbing stairs. I think it was number 5 on the list. But even more interesting was that in the picture showing people climbing a wide, open staircase there were also people sitting on the stairs. The stairs were a place to hang out.

It took me a couple of hours before the message sunk in. I use stairs as a way of getting from one place to another. Even if I am going to hangout when I get there I tend to be "passing through", or in a rush to get to that next place. In this transitional zone between spaces, the vital action of climbing the stairs gets lost because I am already somewhere else. And without my presence my legs get lost in the repetition of unconscious habit.

This is beginning to be a familiar journey to me. Over the years I've worked through serious body/mind breakdowns in my hands, wrists, elbows and shoulders. But I feel that my legs have brought me to the edge of a whole new landscape where the stubborn, lifelong tensions in my hamstrings and creeping dysfunctions in my hips, knees and feet are finally presenting themselves as they truly are - parts of my being that I have not been inhabiting fully. I am moving, bit by bit in an evolution of consciousness; from skirting around the disruptions to my life from degenerating body parts, through the impulse to address their growing dysfunction so they can be "fixed", to feeling my heart opening to disowned parts of my being that need me to invite them more fully our journey through life together.

We have work to do. But it is now becoming "a work", a practice of engagement and mutual learning. My knees and I are beginning to climb stairs, together.