

Speak, Hands Foreword

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"Much must come as a visitation before we call it our own." So said the wise psychoanalyst, Robert Gardner, when writing about the process of self-inquiry as it evolves in the course of a psychoanalysis. For the author of *Speak, Hands*, this kind of visitation comes through the gestures of her hands. With poetry and grace, Lillian Moats leads us in the dance of her memory.

I suspect it is impossible to read this exquisite "memoir" without joining the dance of the author's hands as I did. I found my hands trying to emulate the motions described by Moats as she led me into her meditations and self-explorations. And somehow it is fitting that we readers come to use our bodies to understand her meaning just as she used her body to understand her history. Her history was "written on the bones," and it was through bodily metaphor that she sought to reconnect with the "unthought known" of her earliest past.

This book is filled with provocations and possibilities. Like the author, we remain skeptical of the scientific basis for her way of retrieving her past, yet her self-explorations are isomorphic with recent discoveries of science. Moats' unorthodox manner of retrieving her past calls upon us to consider memory. What is memory? Is memory static and fixed? Or is it, as evidence now suggests, an active and imaginative reconstruction - or construction? The foundation of this construction is some outstanding detail (an image, a word) on which is built a structure of memory. This structure elaborates on ever-active organizations of past reactions and experience. Perception and memory are of a piece. Just as there is no memory without perception, there is no perception without memory. And as memory is the core of the self, it operates continuously, usually outside of awareness, providing the continuity of

existence. Despite new experiences, despite epiphany, we always know who we are because these new aspects are seamlessly incorporated into our memories of our selves.

But then there is the memory that the head knows and memory that the heart knows, which is memory that resides in the body. *Speak, Hands* is about memory of the heart, and the way that memory insinuates itself into the lived experience of everyday. This book is about the author's attempt to translate her memories of the heart into memories of the head, and it serves as instruction to us all. All of us carry memories "in our bones." It is the undaunted courage of the author that will fortify us to listen to the memories of our own bodies.

Why does it take courage to give voice to these memories? I would answer that because these memories feel both unbidden and unknown, they evoke all our fears of dark forests and hidden caverns. There is not the same subjective sense of predictability that one experiences with the ordered recall of factual memories, known as declarative memories. For example, with conscious effort I can remember my birth date (even though I would often prefer not to as I age.) Yet other memories come unbidden, like the memory of childhood that overtook Proust as he smelled and tasted the *petite madeleine* served to him by his mother. In contrast to Proust's memory, sometimes such unbidden memories can be quite unpleasant and unwished for, and we learn strategies to suppress the unwanted intrusions of such memories.

There are many systems of memory, each with a specialization. I might hypothesize that in *Speak, Hands*, Moats is exploring the retrieval of memories through the implicit memory system, memory that unconsciously influences us. She uses what is called 'priming' to evoke her memories. The gestures she made while in meditative trances 'primed,' that is, unconsciously prompted her to recall nonverbal experiences from her early childhood. I believe it is equivocal whether these experiences had never been encoded in narrative form or whether they had been repressed, split off from the narrative translation. In either case, the author often retrieved the affect-laden memories through the gestures that

might have accompanied the original experiences. One part of a gestural configuration elicited the entire gestural sequence. Indeed, we might conjecture that Moats' gestures prime for an entire affective-behavioral sequence that is not consciously retrievable by the author until it is encoded in narrative form. Perhaps this process allows for a re-transcription of memory.

One wonders, of course, what motivated her hands? Though one remains agnostic about this, one can certainly speculate along with the author. Moats describes the mental state in which her hands speak to her in gesture as "a light meditative trance." She explains that in this state *"It is evident that my gestures are being directed by an aspect of consciousness to which I've never had access before.... Though it is at times like a spirit guide, it is of the human spirit – a wiser, reflective capacity that exists – sometimes within, but more often just beyond our accustomed reach."* Later, she concludes, *"...that which we have experienced deeply, wishes to speak through us long after the event is over.... The integrative work of binding experience to identity is, and must be, relentless. It saves us from madness."*

Studies of normal subjects observed in hypnotic or trance-like states have demonstrated that most of us have a "third-party" observing capacity. This is variously called a "hidden observer," an "observing ego," an "internal self-helper," or an "inner guide." This capacity reflects an attempt of the mind to integrate its own states through time and contexts, and it is this capacity that Moats seems to have mined.

Her hands' gestures allowed her to translate previously un verbalized memories into narrative form. As she suggests, these memories related to events that occurred prior to a time when she had language or when her language skills were extremely rudimentary, and for that reason, perhaps, they were never translated into verbal form and existed only as memories in her bones. Of course another reason for the lack of translation from nonverbal to verbal form related to the nature of the memories. All of the childhood recollections that were brought back to her through gesture called up emotions that would have

been intensely threatening to her fragile mother had they been verbalized. Certain of these feelings and states recurred repeatedly into Moats' adulthood. She could not understand these affective-action patterns which she carried with her at all times and which found their way through her hands into her creative products such as the puzzle painting deciphered in the text. Reflecting a split mind, her hands became the carriers of her thoughts and feelings, and became the conduit for uniting her past and present.

As I read this memoir, I was reminded of how patients sometimes use their dreams in therapy. Often, what is reported in a dream is the first articulation of thoughts and feelings that have been too painful to own. Dreams appear to operate in a neverland such that we don't have to fully own their content – "it was only a dream." As the author interprets the gestures of her hands, it is as if she is recounting a dream in which the otherness of her hands gives her the detachment she needs in order to be able to return to such painful places in her psyche.

In this brief foreword, I cannot pay deserved tribute to all the psychological insights that accompanied Moats' singular journey. But the memoir of her courageous and poignant striving towards narration should give us all courage as we attempt to capture the truths of our own lives.

Reference: Gardner, M. Robert (1983) *Self Inquiry*. Boston/Toronto: Little, Brown and Company.