

‘Creating’ a Chocolate Cake

--- The beauty of body language

By

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I stretched my arms horizontally to sketch a big, flat circle in front of my chest; I raised my arms to make it a column; I squeezed my hands along the boundary of the circle; then I snapped my fingers all around the surface.

‘A chocolate cake baked for you, with Belgium chocolate! Two-layered, with fluffy whipped cream on the side and rainbow sprinkles on top..... and cherries toppings!’ I picked and placed the *cherries* one by one, and passed the *chocolate cake* to the girl on my left. ‘Endorphins might help reduce stress from your papers, and delight your day!’ She took one piece of the *cake* and dug into it with an imaginary *fork*: ‘Nice! Chocolate with cream is the all time best combo!’



Illustrations of my imaginary chocolate cake

What I’ve just described is the ‘Imaginary Gift’ activity that takes place at the end of each Drama Therapy class. Ten of us sit in a circle on the carpet; each of us builds a *gift* for a classmate in response to their needs, and also receives one from someone else. Those ‘*gifts*’ are depicted by dramatic body movements. One of us got a *giant trampoline*, one got a *coffee maker, which does not need electricity*, one got a *soft and bouncy pillow* and one got a *fury white kitten*. My *cake* is made of air, but I feel like I can smell the chocolate, or dip my finger into the fluffy cream.

This is the magic of body language; it opens up the realm of imaginations.

Studying in Canada for a few months, I lived a simpler pattern of life, which is delicate to me. In this big land, you take a bus to go get an orange from the closest supermarket; you walk three hours to a bookstore for a novel; searching for a box of oil pastels involves a one-day tour; and the heavy snow in winter can keep you in your warm bedroom for two days. This is why some say you must learn to befriend loneliness and boredom in studying abroad. But this is also how you become independent from materiality: you start looking for fun outside shopping malls and amusement parks. So here I started observing new experiences, such as body language.

Not many people are aware that our body is our free and private vehicle for most activities: communication, movements, thinking and expression etc. I am conscious about Canadian people's freer use of their facial expressions and hand gestures. My American sign language and drama therapy courses have also been helping me to become more closely connected to the dramatic use of my body.

Sign language is a set of communication tools using hand-shapes and upper limbs movements (mainly, also facial expressions) within the Deaf community. Signing requires strong visual and spatial sensitivity. Many concepts in American sign language are described by imitative acts. For example, the idea of 'Cooking' is presented by flipping the right palm on top of the left, as picturing pan-frying a steak or a fish on top of the stove ; 'Pop-corn' is signed by bouncing the fists upwards with the index finger, imitating the action when the corn kernel popped under heating. Imitating is a primitive and inborn way of expression, which enables communication by recalling mutual experiences about the subject. (You know it is pop-corn because you have seen caramel popcorn jumping inside the microwave). Therefore, some signs allow universal understanding. Surpassing any other spoken languages, signs are capable for conveying imagery. For instance, illustrating an imaginary map for directions; drawing complicated shapes (you can play tic-tac-toe without papers!); indicating object relationships by using classifiers, etc.



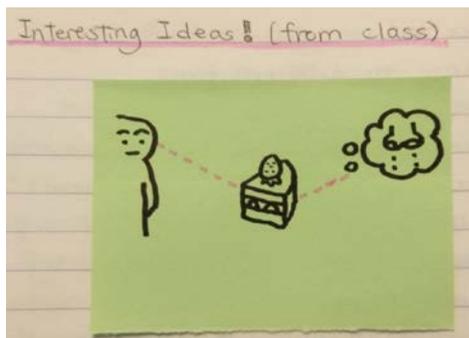
Screenshots of my American Sign language video, 2017 (From left to right: Sit on a couch, Compete, Looking at a picture)

In the therapeutic use of drama practices, the body is a form for expression. Body language has superiority and is more fun than using the verbal one: It is implicit, and open-ended without pointing to one model answer. An actor's body helps to discover and express imaginary (or abstract) ideas (Jones, 2007). Say, it is more vivid to tell how big a BLT sandwich is with your hands, than mentioning its size in centimetres; and perhaps a free-style dance is an easier way to demonstrate your despair than through a speech. In Drama Therapy, you are encouraged to participate in your physical body in diverse ways. One example of classic practices is the 'Jungle': with natural background music, we are instructed to act like an animal that they come up with. We then *crawl* around the room with this new role, and interact with other species: The *eagle* is now standing on the desk top searching for prey with his sharp eyes, the *hummingbird* is busily flipping her wings, sitting on the lazy *hippopotamus's* back..... The drama that is created, theoretically reflects the real personalities and dynamics within the group. In actual cases, therapist and clients would talk and try unfolding the metaphorical meaning behind certain improvised dramatic acts. Through both conscious and unconscious body language, we take a peek into the thoughts and feelings in the inner mind.

I am so agitated with these new knowledge and awareness of my own body. Previously I saw the physical body as a sealed capsule, imprisoning you in this universe. You forget about it until you suffer from its malfunctioning (illness). But I've now been given a user's manual for the body. Body language makes you a better story teller, assigned you new non-verbal vocabularies to talk. The physical body does not limit you: 'Our body limits extend as long as our senses can reach' (Merleau-Ponty, 1945). For example, your body is extended to outside in the streets when you hear a fire truck pass by.



The puppet library I found on campus, which is used for the Drama Therapy class



My lecture notes about Body and Senses

When you study abroad, enhanced sensitivity (eg. sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch), can help you to discover deeper relationships between yourself and the surrounding world. Your nose appreciates the scent of the cinnamon, your ears listen to the cracking of autumn leaves under your shoe, your skin feels the warmth of the bonfire. The whole world becomes your playground. And your imagination even expands your world. Through your imagination you escape from the troubled logic of daily life, and enter an extraordinary space (Knill, 2004), where you can have extraordinary stories happening.

Leaving home, you pack your luggage. With a 23kg weight limit, you had to give up your heavy camera; you kept your old diaries on the bookshelf and left your favourite coffee cup behind. Travelling allows you to realize that you can survive without the many things that you thought to be so necessary. And you will find that your body is your last best friend.

Now this piece of *chocolate cake* is in your hands, intangible — It cannot satisfy your growling stomach but it can heal your heart magically with imaginary Endorphins.

References

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My beloved Canada

About the author

WU Hin Yan (Gina) is a major in Fine Arts at CUHK. In her last year of undergraduate studies she participated in a semester-long international exchange programme at the University of Alberta (Canada) from September-December 2017. As the host institution, she took art therapy, drama therapy, and American Sign language courses.