



# Dancing with Gravity

By Darrell Sanchez

**To be human means to orient vertically; it is our most fundamental human orientation. We live the majority of our lives in a vertical posture, assuming the advantages and challenges of the evolutionary development of a vertical spine. From infancy on we don't waste any time trying to get ourselves vertical. Place a baby on his stomach and one of his first movements is to raise his head. He doesn't stop there. As soon as possible he proceeds to push up, sit up, and stand up.**

**To be human means to orient vertically;** it is our most fundamental human orientation. We live the majority of our lives in a vertical posture, assuming the advantages and challenges of the evolutionary development of a vertical spine. From infancy on we don't waste any time trying to get ourselves vertical. Place a baby on his stomach and one of his first movements is to raise his head. He doesn't stop there. As soon as possible he proceeds to push up, sit up, and stand up.

**Yet, integrated vertical standing is not** a fixed and rigid state. Rather, it is a dynamic

stance that makes continual fine adjustments in gravity. This continual stable motion in our posture and internal organs rouses information in the form of emotions, memories, thoughts and sensations. When our entire posture is set in motion, the organs of our bodies are also set in motion. Our internal organs also have sensory and motor nerves that travel to and from the brain transmitting information and response to movements of the body. "The more viscerally aware, the more emotionally attuned you are," say the Blakeslees in their book, *The Body Has a Mind of Its Own* (2007, p. 181).

### **Imagine standing on a gently moving**

surface that activates nerves and muscles in the feet and ankles and sets our postures in motion, stimulating postural proprioceptors. Standing on a gently moving surface challenges our stuckness. By doing so we experience that balance is not a fixed state but is relative to motion and continual adjustments in gravity. During my somatic trauma studies, I invented a special kind of balancing board upon which people stand that I call the Tuning Board. The name comes from the word "attune", meaning to bring into harmony, awareness, understanding and responsiveness. It is a psychokinesthetic tool that therapists can use to help get clients more fully into their bodies. It produces motion that goes through the entire body, including the viscera and the autonomic nervous system. This movement, caused by our weight in gravity, stimulates sensory nerves that travel from the feet, ankles, and knees up the body and into our heads. They register, consciously or not, through the spine and up to the top middle-center portion of our neocortex. This means that the feet are essentially in the brain. So, too, the brain is in the feet. Motor nerves that respond to movement and stimulation travel back down the spine and to the muscles that work our balance and posture. This coordination of stimulation and response up and down the nervous system is vertical integration and is a vital factor in psychological well-being (Rolf, 1977; Siegel, 2006, 2010).

### **Vertical integration occurs when**

differentiated structures and the resources of embodiment associate, function in unity, and keep us upright. Siegel (2006) associates vertical integration with the middle pre-frontal area of the brain that enables appropriate physical and emotional response to our relationships and the world around us. Balance and verticality are intimate partners that draw on integration, i.e., all parts working together in harmony. Thus, integration is necessary for creative flow, emotional well-being, and postural motion and stability.



### **Flow happens as we engage in a living**

relationship with our imperative need for transformation and growth. The experience of standing on the Tuning Board is not only a biomechanical task that increases someone's awareness and skill at balancing; it also evokes a symbolic creative imperative of how we manage the polarity of stability and change. However, people get stuck. We get that way because of trauma, injury, aging, conditioned habits, facing difficult choices, and so on. Perhaps we have gotten that way because someone rear-ended us in our car and our body doesn't move the way it used to. Maybe it happened when we were trying to decide whether to remain in a current job or relationship or to move on to something different. Being stuck feels like we can't access the creative flow of life and shrinks us away from the world of possibility around us. From a somatic perspective, we become dissociated from our innate interoception, or the ability to sense what is happening in our bodies, thoughts, and feelings.

**My colleague, Vivian Gettliffe, and I** have identified seven vertical embodiment resources related to vertical integration: balance, grounding, centering, orienting, spaciousness, healthy myofascial tone and connection. These are what encourage the coming together of sensation, perception and expression. The Tuning Board can be used to specifically develop these resources in clients. As they are encouraged, the body itself becomes a primary resource.

**Working with the Tuning Board kindles** our kinesthetic sense, or our internal awareness of the movement and position of our bodies. As therapists, we are always tuning into and attempting to resonate with our clients' experiences. We want to feel and understand exactly what their realities and expressions are as best we can.

**Kinesthetic resonance is the ability to** harmonize with the sensations of someone else. It generates impressions in the therapist in the form of sensations, thoughts, emotions, images and possible meanings to the expressions of the client with whom we are attuning. This is a holistic and intimately relational experience; it is a knowing that includes and goes beyond a mental understanding of what someone is communicating and includes the somatic and embodied dimensions. This sensing is important to our practice of embodiment—the better our kinesthetic ability, the more embodied we feel. This applies to both therapist and client.

**What does it feel like to be more emotionally attuned?**

**I believe it feels like confidence** and equanimity. It feels like the peace and pleasure of embodiment. I have yet to find anyone who does not acknowledge that the flow of movement and the balance of motion and stability feel good.

**When I was a dancer,** I received regular bodywork sessions to augment my career in imaginative dance expression. My company mates and I realized that it was a necessary strategy for our dancing survival and longevity. Back then, all the members of the dance company I was in received Rolwing™ Structural Integration—a form of bodywork that emphasizes good alignment and a dynamic relation to gravity. I was amazed at the memories, emotions and personal insights that arose during and after the sessions and began to realize the psychological impact they had on me. I realized that the value of somatic work or therapy was in how we humans experience the physical structure and its relation to the intangibles of our personal and shared psychology. Those sessions were the seeds that inspired me to become a Certified Rolfer® with an impassioned interest in studying somatic psychology, trauma and creativity.





### **Creativity draws strongly on fluid**

intelligence, which is defined as the ability to adapt to new situations (Bristol, Kaufman, & Vartanian, 2013). For me, an important meaning of somatic psychology is that physical, emotional and cognitive processes and relationships translate and share reciprocal meanings. New insights, sensations and meanings can and do transfer seamlessly from body to mind and mind to body. Metaphors for life demonstrate this intimate relationship (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). Such statements as: "standing our ground," "reaching for the stars," and "losing our footing," are examples. One colleague stood behind her client while the client was on the Tuning Board. Instantly, the client reported she could feel the therapist's support, like the saying, "you have my back." Another colleague's client shared her insight that when she began to deeply embody what grounding is from standing on the Tuning Board, it brought up sadness that she doesn't have more support in her life. Awareness of somatic sensations generated by postural movements helps make associations and integration between the body and psychological processes more likely. I realized that any study of creativity I would be excited about had to include a more fully embodied experience into the meaning of being human.

### **Creative transformation occurs when**

something undergoes fundamental change. A more specific description of the creative process is offered by Henry David Feldman (Csikszentmihalyi, Feldman, & Gardner, 1994). Feldman refers to the process of generating newness as the "transformational imperative," the dynamic tension of opposing forces and how we relate to and resolve them. Here the primary opposing forces creating tension in Feldman's imperative are order and chaos, where one force wants to continually bring stability while the other is constantly moving for change.

### **What does it mean to consciously face**

the transformational imperative and its existential forces of chaos and order, stability and motion? We encounter this fundamental question in our somatic psychological process of growth, development and healing every day. Standing on a Tuning Board evokes this polarity flow of stable motion as a symbolic wave that represents the creative process. And when a client reports a new insight, a new awareness or a new association, we know that creativity has happened.

**Darrell Sanchez, LPC, PhD**, has practiced and taught therapeutic modalities based on the integration of mind and body for over thirty years. His expertise in trauma therapy is informed by a background in structural integration, movement therapy, dance, creativity studies, somatic experiencing, and other somatic modalities. As a structural integrator, he brings a deep understanding of human verticality and the primordial relationship with gravity to his psychological work. His work facilitates creative transformation through engaging the whole person.

[References on page 140](#)

**Learn more at Darrell's session at the USABP conference on using the Tuning Board and vertical embodiment to help the body reclaim its place as primary resource.**

## References

- Blakeslee, S., & Blakeslee, M. (2007). *The body has a mind of its own: How body maps in your brain help you do (almost) everything better*. NY: Random House.
- Bristol, A. S., Kaufman, J. C., & Vartanian, O. (Eds.). (2013). *Neuroscience of creativity*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press
- Feldman, D. H., Csikszentmihalyi, M., & Gardner, H (1994). *Changing the world: A framework for the study of creativity*. 1994. Westport, CT: Praeger
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1999). *Philosophy in the flesh: The embodied mind and its challenge to western thought*. NY: Basic Books.
- Rolf, I. P. (1977). *Rolfing: Reestablishing the natural alignment and structural integration of the human body for vitality and well-being*. Rochester, Vermont: Healing Arts Press.
- Siegel, D. J. (2006). An interpersonal neurobiology approach to psychotherapy: Awareness, mirror neurons, and neuroplasticity in the development of well-being. *Psychiatric Annals*, 36(4), 248-256.
- Siegel, D. J. (2010). The complexity choir: The eight domains of self-integration. *Psychotherapy Networker*, January/February
-