“There is no single story that tells the truth of this community of cells self-organizing within our skin.”

— Susan Raffo

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How Does It Feel to Be In Your Body?

by Lydia Moran, associate editor

Working on this issue led me to think a lot about relationships — the relationships we form with our bodies that evolve as we age, and how those changing relationships alter our connection to the world around us.

Sometimes there is an unwelcome third entity in our relationships with our bodies. It could be the government — I am thinking about the women and girls currently risking their lives to protest in Iran and those of us in the U.S. who face increasingly restricted reproductive and gender-affirming care. It could be societal pressure to fit into dominant standards.

Living through the pandemic in my twenties has changed how I relate to my body. I have learned what it feels like to be disassociated from my physical form amid anxiety and isolation.

Contributor Drew Maude-Griffin writes that living in an immunocompromised body during the pandemic has left enormous holes in their sense of community. Poet Gabriela Spears-Rico’s experience with Bell’s palsy leads her to grapple with her ties to Mesoamerican ancestors. Natalie Nation looks to her inner child for inspiration and a sense of “body joy” after struggling with disordered eating.

Susan Raffo writes, “These bodies … are what we have and who we are. Keeping them a disconnected mystery is what trauma, oppression, and the conditioning that numbs and freezes us depend on.”

Of course, this magazine cannot hold the infinite feelings we have in and about our bodies. As you read, you might take a moment to observe where you are in yours.

From the Publisher: We Need Your Support

We are living in a country where reproductive justice, public safety, democracy, and diversity in education and politics are shifting. The unique media mission of Changemakers Alliance (CALL) is to support necessary transformational leadership, especially by women of color and LGBTQ+ people.

The focus of Minnesota Women’s Press storytelling and CALL discussions in 2023 will be on resilience and innovation inspired with mentors, creatives, and entrepreneurs; as well as energy and power created when urban, suburban, and rural people are brought together.

The impact of collaborative conversations was reinforced when I attended an amazing global summit in Washington, D.C., in mid-October. There were 150 people from roughly 50 countries talking together about the universal issues of climate change, political accountability, gender-based violence, and peace-building.

We have identified our magazine themes and CALL conversation topics for 2023 based on community discussions. For greater impact, Minnesota Women’s Press needs to add people to our revenue-generating team. We also need Greater Minnesota-based marketing specialists and reporters.

More than ever, we need you as readers and donors.

— Mikki Morrissette

womenspress.com/perspectives-from-a-global-summit
womenspress.com/donate
2023 themes: womenspress.com/submit-a-story
CALL conversations: womenspress.com/call
Three Key Topics for 2023
written by Mikki Morrissette, publisher

Action: Elect Stronger Political Leadership

We talked with more than 30 Minnesota candidates and campaign advocates as part of the Women in Politics series in our new Changemakers Alliance (CALL) division. We discussed the socioeconomic hurdles that have limited most of our elected officials to heterosexual middle-aged white men — limiting the scope of perspectives that lead to policies and funding.

We talked about why women are strong leaders. Clare Oumou Verbeten, who is running for Minnesota Senate, told us: “My mom had to completely start over when she immigrated from Senegal — learn a new language, build a new career, and raise my sister and me. She is going to be damned if we lose our right to abortion access. So many of us can relate to really strong people in our life who have been through so much. That is the way we plan to lead, clear on our values.”

This discussion will not end with the 2022 election.

Thanks to underwriters Ayada Leads, VoteRunLead, and Valvoline of northern Minnesota for enabling us to create this series.

Discuss: Co-Create Healthy Masculinity

Michigan Advance published an article titled “Misogyny Is Fueling the Country’s Gun Violence Epidemic.” It quoted an Anti-Defamation League report as indicating that we recognize and call out white supremacists who make their hatred known as extremists, but “we have not been nearly as unequivocal in our condemnation when it comes to men who express violent anger toward and loathing for women.”

The author of that report, Jessica Reaves, says this oversight is because “there is no cost to treating women like objects and talking about them as if they are subhuman. ... The way we treat mothers and parents, the way we provide no support for child care, the way we don’t pay teachers enough. All of these things are rooted in the belief that women are not worth as much. That plays into why people can get away with quite literally murder when it comes to attitudes towards women.”

Says Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer, who was targeted in an assassination attempt: “Threats continue. I have looked out my windows and seen large groups of heavily armed people within 30 yards of my home. I have seen myself hung in effigy.”

We are planning CALL conversations with Minnesotans engaged in reducing gender-based violence, as well as with people under the age of 30, to inform our March and April magazine issues.

Contact editor@womenspress.com if you would like to participate.

Solve: Trauma Is Killing Minnesotans

According to a series of stories by Minnesota Reformer, statewide overdose deaths hit a record high in 2021. Additionally, more than 1,100 Minnesotans died due to excessive drinking in 2021, which has doubled since 2014. Alcohol is the ninth-leading cause of death in the state, twice the number of traffic fatalities.

There also were 570 gun deaths in Minnesota in 2021, including 164 homicides and 393 suicides. Suicides account for roughly two-thirds of all Minnesota gun deaths.

We will be talking about how to improve public safety with trauma-informed care, addressing addictions and mental health, and adjusting gun access.

Sign up to learn more: tinyurl.com/MWPConnect
November 5 – December 11 —
Between the Stripes, Under the Stars

Who is an American? A new exhibition featuring work by ten women artists — the majority of whom are immigrants from Asia, the Middle East, and Africa — explores that question. Artists ponder identity within the context of the legacy of colonialism, multiculturalism, language, and gender. Free. The Catherine G. Murphy Gallery, Saint Paul. gallery.stkate.edu

November 10 —
Public Monuments in the Human Landscape

A panel of scholars and public art practitioners will discuss perspectives on murals and monuments in the U.S., including who is honored in public spaces and whose contributions are misrepresented or unrecognized. Do public art and monuments truly represent our history and values? Free; registration required. Online and in person at Northrop, Minneapolis. northrop.umn.edu

November 11 — Finding Her Beat

For thousands of years, women have been locked out of Taiko drumming. But in the dead of a Minnesota winter, drumming women smash patriarchal norms. The new documentary “Finding Her Beat” delves into a historic Taiko performance as women navigate differences in culture, age, language, and performing styles. This screening is part of Sound Unseen Festival. $13. 7pm. The Parkway Theater, Minneapolis. herbeatfilm.com

November 18 — Oh God, A Show About an Abortion

Last summer, Brooklyn-based comedian Alison Leiby had two root canals, a trip to the “fertility” section of a Missouri CVS, and a dozen meltdowns. In her new show, Leiby catalogues the minutiae, twisted practices, and surprising perspective that come with exercising reproductive rights. $25–$35. 8pm. The Parkway Theater, Minneapolis. spittakeseries.com

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Throughout your life, have you seen a societal shift in how we relate to our bodies?

Kaytee Crawford, Birth and Postpartum Doula

Having grown up in an environment where we did not really discuss our bodies beyond how they looked, I have definitely noticed a societal shift. Is it perfect? No, but it is better than it was when I was a kid.

I did not truly understand bodies until I became a parent and, later, a doula. I like to look at the amazing things my body has done for me. It has carried four babies to term; it has nourished four babies for over five years. Baby me could never. Stretch marks back in the day felt like a death sentence to my self-esteem, and now they are badges of badassery that I wear with pride.

Even though society is better at accepting bodies of all shapes and sizes, it is still a work in progress. I am constantly trying to uplift and support my boys’ changing bodies. Puberty is hard, y’all. But I’m glad to know that others out there will affirm them in their changing bodies. We need to help support the notion that all bodies are good bodies.

Jane Hufford Downes, Writer

I have been a disabled woman all of my adult life because of the autoimmune disease lupus. About 90 percent of the people with the condition are women. Forty years ago, it was assumed doctors — mostly men — had authority over disabled bodies. Women were “protected” from information about their condition, and medical professionals treated disabled bodies as mentally unstable.

Two things contributed to shifting attitudes — first, the explosion of the internet. Finally, women had access to medical information. More importantly, we had access to other women with the same condition. Comparing symptoms, we noted similarities and demanded better information and treatment from our doctors.

Secondly, over decades, women entered the medical profession. Women physicians seemed more willing to understand my disease, and women researchers were more willing to study it. As a result, society became aware of lupus and how it affects women.

I have seen huge improvements in how society perceives disabled women’s bodies, but there is a long way to go. Hopefully, through increased information and awareness, the bodies of women with lupus will no longer be threatened by society’s attitudes or the disease.
Leslie Surbeck, Physician

I tend to be skeptical of anything related to advertising, but I have to admit I appreciate the recent shift to include more diverse models in marketing. When my daughters and I go shopping these days, we see pictures of models with a broader range of body shapes, sizes, and colors. This may be a small and relatively superficial change, but it is certainly different than when I was growing up, and I welcome it. It feels like a small opening, a lifting of a weight. It rejects the idea that there is one ideal physical shape to which we should aspire and is an invitation to appreciate the beauty inherent in all human bodies.

Shirlynn LaChapelle, Nurse Consultant

Yes, there has been a societal shift as our knowledge and understanding has grown. People are concerned about the negative effects of stress, nutrition, and chemical toxins on their bodies and psyche. We are cognizant of their effects on aging, cognition, and our susceptibility to disease. We strive for self-care, even if it is hard to realize due to the endless responsibilities controlling our lives. At some point, we must learn to stop and say, “Enough.” We must regain control of our lives by putting everything on pause that is not essential to our immediate needs, realizing the importance of just breathing, quieting the mind, smelling the air, and being in the moment. Learning to breathe and meditate is a fantastic way to release stress and to realize what and who is important in our lives.

When I am feeling overcome by stress, I find a quiet corner to sit, breathe, meditate, and focus on my happy place. As I breathe in, I allow peace to come. As I exhale, I release stress and its toxic chemicals.
In first grade I threw up in the bathroom sink at school. After I received a bewildered scolding for not puking in the toilet behind me, I lay down in the back of the classroom and waited to be picked up. I don’t remember throwing up or the fever I likely had, but I do remember my dad carrying me bridal style out of the classroom to the car. I remember hearing my classmates bemoan that they wanted to go home too. I remember smiling limply in my dad’s arms as he carried me over my classmates’ heads — my Leo spirit fed by the drama of it all — and smugly thinking, “I can’t wait to watch cartoons.”

Sometimes when I tell people I am sick, I feel as though they see that first grader. The pukey kid with a flair for drama, who went home that day almost 20 years ago and sat in a nest of pillows while sucking down Capri Sun after Capri Sun and watching SpongeBob. I wish that were what illness is.

I became chronically ill somewhere between the ages of 19 and 20. I have not known a carefree day of cartoons and Capri Suns since. I was diagnosed with fibromyalgia and myalgic encephalomyelitis (commonly referred to as chronic fatigue syndrome or ME/CFS).

Every day I wake up feeling like I am dying. Every day, I fight incredibly hard to live any semblance of the life I dreamt for myself. Most days, I am not able to do anything other than collapse into bed. Though I have been an artist since childhood, I rarely make art anymore. It has only been six years since this began, but it feels like a lifetime.

When I first became sick, all I wanted was for the people around me to understand what I was experiencing. As an artist, a lot of my practice became about explaining my illnesses, trying to show what was invisible — the excruciating full-body pain and fatigue, the grief of a once undefined future now colored by illness. My paintings became illustrative of my symptoms, and I explored new mediums in an attempt to communicate my experience more viscerally. Six months into the pandemic, I grew tired of making this work. The pandemic has been devastatingly revealing.

ME/CFS is a post-viral illness that shattered my body and immune system after I caught mono as a teenager. If I caught Covid, I don’t know if my body would be able to heal, if I would be able to live independently, if I would have any of the energy I fight to have now.

I have almost given up on being able to do everyday things again. I dream about going to the movies, eating at a restaurant, having friends over without masks and being able to hug them and sit arm to arm while we watch bad TV or do each other’s makeup. I have lost many friendships because of my health and the level of precaution I take. I have lost many opportunities. I have missed many special moments. I have lost a sense of
community. I have grieved all of it.

Grief is a powerful indicator of transformation. It is an inevitable part of moving from past to present to future. During the pandemic, my practice has shifted from attempting to explain my sick body to imagining a future where sick bodies are cherished. I have made work that I imagine as a portal into a kinder time, where care and community are prioritized. I am beginning to make work that holds the grief of now, the desperate ache for tangible steps to make that future possible. I am searching for community in everything — holding closely in my mind every person who is in a similar place during this pandemic, whether they are sick, disabled, a caregiver, or simply trying to protect themselves and others from the virus.

Every day when I wake up, I still feel like I am dying. I swallow my grief down like fish oil. Then, I roll this illusory community of sick love and care across my tongue and teeth — sweet, warm, like hard cinnamon candy. I think about the art I will make, even if my body does not allow me to do it that day, even though I am not sure what futures are truly possible. For now, the soft burn of cinnamon on my tongue feels like enough.

Drew Maude-Griffin (they/them) is a teaching artist, writer, and curator in Minneapolis.
Here is how it should be: we are born and, as we grow older, we learn ways to talk about and experience what is happening within our skin as well as what is happening outside of us. Education, we all know, should support us to experience life. This means supporting us to be in deep relationship with our first and original homes: our physical bodies and the communities of life that are their shape and swirl.

Contrary to what it says at the top of the page, learning anatomy doesn’t matter. Learning the Latin names or a textbook’s idea of the correct placement of the duodenum or the third cervical vertebrae doesn’t matter. Learning anatomy as poetry, as history, as cultural understanding of physical tissue, that’s what matters. Learning anatomy as a way to be the first gathering place of the intestines (duodenum) or to feel/know/understand the throb and shape of a headache that rides low at the back of your head (third cervical nerve and so much more), that’s what matters. Learning anatomy is not about assigning facts to parts but about sensing in and becoming that anatomy. It’s about experiencing our own lives in a place of nuance and detail, completely and always connected.

Learning anatomy is, at its core, about learning about difference rather than standardization. As with communities, there are some things you can say are likely to be true about the collective of cells called a human body, but this likeliness does not mean that there is a normal or an average body. Such a thing doesn’t exist. Hearts are not all in the same place in the chest cavity, nerves do not act or move or attach in the exact same way in every body, and let me tell you: organs migrate. Ask any person who spends
time looking at the inside of a human body; they will tell you that anatomy is a map that helps give you a sense of the general layout, but when you go looking, things are often not where or how you thought they would be. It's why I like to call anatomy poetry rather than fact: it evokes something that then helps us to understand what we are experiencing.

It's important to think of anatomy as poetry rather than steady fact. It's important to the path of liberation and to honoring the sovereignty of individual bodies to have their own experience of themselves. There have been and continue to be entire social and economic systems, medical practices and eugenic practices, deeply racialized and gendered and ableist ways of approaching the body, that focus on identifying which kind of body is “normal.” Across history and in the present moment, horrific things have been done to bodies defined as not “normal” to bring them “back” under control. Systems of definition, like race, gender, and often health, have been created to distinguish between normal and different, and then to attach meaning (and violence) to that difference. How we talk about — and experience, connect with, care about, live in, and attend to — bodies matters.

This thing we call anatomy, this wealth of information cataloged on the page, this compilation of drawings, recordings, and objects floating in formaldehyde, evolved out of a mix of slow observation and violent attack. In the U.S., the so-called “father of modern gynecology,” J. Marion Sims, forced his research on the bodies of enslaved Black women, building a compendium of “knowledge” about gynecology that is still taught with rarely any awareness of (or repair and healing around) where that knowledge originated. There are stories like this throughout the history and development of anatomy as a science.

Still, it is important to learn anatomy, its poetry and flow, the violence and pain of its history, the liberation possible in its sharing. It is important to learn a story of connection that does not single out the heatedness of the sympathetic nervous system without also talking about its relationships to everything complex and marvelous within us — and to the histories outside us that helped to give it its name. It is important to learn, to become, connection to the cellular experience that is our life.

These bodies are our original homes. Our beginning place. They are also our ending place and our place in between. They are what we have and who we are. Keeping them a disconnected mystery is what trauma, oppression, and the conditioning that numbs and freezes us depend on.

The poetry of anatomy is just one way to pay attention. There is no single story that tells the truth of this community of cells self-organizing within our skin. Chinese medicine has a completely different story about what goes on inside. So does the yogic tradition, and aboriginal traditions, and Yoruba traditions, and on and on. What gets called Western anatomy is an evolved and emerged set of stories and understandings, wiser in some places and more awkward in others. What we call the science of anatomy emerged first, as far as we know, in North Africa, particularly in Egypt, about 3,700 years ago. Because there was wisdom in it, this way of talking about the physical body began then mixing with cultural traditions and understandings in Greece, and then flowed back and forth among Islamic, Christian, and Jewish thinkers and dreamers, poets, and scientists, until becoming this thing that we recognize today. This evolution of illumination, of excitement and learning, should also be part of its teaching, alongside the violence and disregard that has flourished through its development. Like a whole body, this is a whole story. And it is only one story, one way of assigning meaning to shapes and spaces around and within us.

We have been here all, before and beyond every story: pumping blood, swirling lymph, laughing and crying and experiencing all kinds of pleasure.

I get dizzy and feel weepy when someone tells me the story of some aspect of the body. Embryological development makes me shaky, in a good way — like some love-buzz drug welling up from those ancestral, evolutionary spaces, echoes of long ago that are still here, just like our vestigial tails and early tadpole-in-the-uterus moments.

I dream about teaching an anatomy class one day, about teaching it as a ceremony and respect, as a conversation about remembering and also about coming home through poetry and practice. I dream about teaching an anatomy class that doesn't limit itself to the boundaries of the human shape but instead shares in a way that says: look at how our noses are like and different from the noses of wolves. Look at how the mitochondria in our cells and the chloroplasts in plants have the same grandparents. Can you feel it? Can you feel how we all remember each other?

It's what we can tell our youngest when they are new-body discovering themselves and the world around them. This, this body is part of your magic! Go ahead and be it, feel it, know it. It’s your home, your glorious and original home that helps you feel/be/ know that the specificity that is you is no more separated from the whole than your liver or fingernail is from you.

This, after all, is the ultimate wisdom that our body shares with us: we can be two things at the same time, completely specific and unique as well as, seamlessly, the inhale and exhale of a greater connected breath that is the rhythm of life itself.
When Deneane Richburg began competitively figure skating as a child, moving on the ice became “synonymous with breathing,” she says. But Richburg found the skating world rooted in a toxic value system hostile to her Blackness. In 2013, Richburg started the performing arts company Brownbody, where she and associate artistic director Lela Aisha Jones lead all-Black casts of skating artists who use the ice to express African diasporic history and identity. We caught up with Richburg to chat about embodied storytelling and why her work is “rooted in bringing the past with me everywhere.”

Let’s begin with your early experiences with skating. What led you to the sport?

I was born and raised in Maplewood. As a child, I had a lot of energy, and my parents wanted to expose me and my brothers to as many activities as possible. Chasing after a ball was not interesting to me — I realized what resonated was anything involving movement and expression using the body. My parents signed me up for skating lessons when I was five, and they stuck. I remember hobbling my way across the ice as a child and whipping myself into a spin, not really knowing what I was doing. Eventually, I started taking lessons with a private coach and competing.

Growing up in Maplewood in the eighties and nineties, I felt like my family was one of four or five Black families in the entire suburb. We felt alone in many ways. I remember my mom telling me that when my brother and I were toddlers at the grocery store, the white shoppers and workers would stare at us like we were baby aliens. I think about my mom and dad, and how alienating and uncomfortable that must have been for them.

Coming up as a competitive figure skater in the overwhelmingly white world of skating, [I experienced] emotional and psychological trauma that I often did not realize until I reflected on it as an adult. With skating, you are constantly judged and critiqued; that is the nature of the sport. But layered on top of that, for me, was the bias and critique that were passed because of the color of my skin and the shape of my body. I was always tall; I developed hips, thighs, and a butt early. It was difficult to tell if judgment was coming as a result of my skill as a figure skater or because of the color of my skin and the shape of my body. I also experienced some explicit racist acts within the Twin Cities skating world.

As a result, I internalized a lot of toxic narratives around Blackness and being a young woman. It was not until I got out of the Midwest to complete an MFA in dance...
choreography in Philadelphia that I started to gain some perspective. I realized that my body is not odd; it is beautiful and powerful, and I should be proud of it. I am proud of it. But living in the context of upper Midwestern whiteness, I could not see that. All of that made and continues to make my experience as a skater complicated. On the one hand, I really love skating and expressing myself through my body on the ice. But on the other hand, I am not interested in traditional skating spaces because of that toxic value system.

**How did you return to skating?**

Even through the trials and tribulations of skating, it is something that I have been doing my whole life. For me, it is synonymous with breathing, and I firmly believe that whatever is done off the ice can also be done on the ice. For my MFA thesis, under the loving guidance of my advisor and mentor Dr. Kariamu Welsh, I performed and choreographed a piece on the ice focused on a woman named Saartjie Baartman. Saartjie was a Khoikhoi woman who was alive in the early 1800s. She possessed attributes valued by the Khoikhoi culture — large buttocks, hips, and extended labia. When she was working on a Dutch plantation, the farmer's brother decided to take and parade her around Europe.

She was put on display while white onlookers objectified her. They used racist tropes about Black women, who were seen as exotic subhumans and Jezebels. Eventually, Saartjie was taken to France, where a man named Georges Cuvier performed experiments on her. Within a few weeks, she died. He dissected her genitalia and put her body on display at the French Natural History Museum. It wasn't until the early 2000s that her body was returned to South Africa for proper burial. To this day, I can see the residue of this level of objectification and exploitation of the Black female body in the way that Black femininity is perceived.

Performing this piece about Saartjie made me realize that using the physical advantages of the ice — the momentum, being able to play with how energy moves through the body while gliding — offers another dimension to stories.

Furthermore, I really wanted to shift how we understand skating — moving from something that thin young white girls in sequin dresses do to a place where Blackness can be affirmed, where nuanced and honest stories rooted in Blackness can be told, and where cultural expression can happen.

I moved back to Minnesota and established Brownbody as a home for my artistic work. It is meant to be a nourishing space that allows Black artists to understand who we are as
human beings outside of narrow and toxic popular narratives associated with Blackness.

**What stories have you been most compelled to tell and explore with this art form?**

Much of the work I have created somehow relates to Toni Morrison’s book “Beloved.” “Living Past (Re)Memory” [performed 2011–2013] focuses on the complicated relationship between Sethe and the 18-year-old baby ghost, Beloved. “Quiet As It’s Kept” [performed 2015–2017] drew parallels between the Reconstruction Era and the rise of Jim Crow and the race-based police brutality that continues to happen. That was performed in a time of seemingly back-to-back police murders of Black people and many instances of intense physical violence and emotional brutality. We need to recognize that our modern-day policing system is rooted in this kind of white mob vigilantism prevalent during that time.

“Tracing Sacred Steps” [performed 2019–2022] is about connecting to ancestors and affirming the sacredness of our rage. We performed Ring Shout [a spiritual ritual performed by enslaved Africans involving rhythmic circular movement] to ground in reflection, affirm the presence of spirit in the air, and illustrate how the practice continues in Black sacred spaces today.

When possible, we bring the audience onto the ice so they can physically feel the speed and the momentum, the wind that blows past their face, when a skating artist glides by. In our pre-Covid days, we would try to facilitate direct interactions between performers and audience members. In 2019, the skating artists entered the rink through the audience and handed out postcards with images of ancestors and jars of natural elements such as water, river rock, sand, and mud. We asked them to hold these things throughout the performances to reestablish that connection between our history and the natural world.

We are also fortunate to work with the amazing Sandra Richardson, Brownbody’s undoing-racism, healing, and organizational consultant. She facilitates our post-performance discussions and works to ensure we remain grounded in our values. We want to ensure that those discussions do not espouse Euro-dominant ways of being, and that all voices are heard.

Every element of what we are experiencing today is rooted in what came before us. Currently, it feels like so many are disconnected from our history; it is not properly taught in schools. That is why so much of my work is rooted in bringing the past with me everywhere. We don’t have to wallow in the painful elements of the past, but we need to know they happened.

**Can you describe that process of getting a story into your body?**

I experience the world through movement and sensation in the body. I have been told that I talk with my hands; my gestures do as much of the work of explaining as my words because I feel whatever I am thinking through my body. While performing, I have to mentally and emotionally go to whatever I am trying to convey, while simultaneously moving through choreography.

I invite artists to bring their whole selves to the creative process. We do a lot of improv to capture key moments, and then choreograph those together. [For example, in choreographing “Tracing Sacred Steps”] we asked skaters what invisible presences exist in the air around us — what does that do to your body? Some folks in the cast have extensive backgrounds skating in large-scale productions, so they help me bring to life these different formations and patterns of ensemble movement across the ice.

It is a unique group of people willing to create in an environment where the focus is on the process as a journey and not always on the final “product.” In competitive skating, you are trained to achieve certain skills. Instead, I’m like, “Let’s engage in a process.”

Brownbody runs a donation-based learn-to-skate program featuring an all-Black team of skating instructors. “One of the main goals of that program is to create a welcoming and nourishing experience for people in Black and brown communities that might be coming to the ice for their first time,” Richburg says.
Support our advertisers — and tell them you saw their ad in Minnesota Women's Press!
Shawntera Hardy, former commissioner of the Department of Employment and Economic Development, wants to ensure that Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) have everything they need to thrive in this economy. I met Hardy while filming a documentary called “Shot of Influence,” which focused on Minnesota entrepreneurs.

Hardy offered a call to action in the film. She said she wants to hold people accountable for supporting and funding BIPOC businesses and entrepreneurs. After George Floyd was murdered by police, “It was very touching to see folks provide this national stage in particular for Black business. But now the receipts are due. What did you buy? What did you invest in? Because for Black business, this is livelihood. This is not numbers on a spreadsheet. This is not for social media likes. This is generations of continuing wealth gap in BIPOC communities not invested in.”

When you are making a gift purchase for a friend or family member, consciously think about your consumer power. Consider, for example, buying gift cards to BIPOC-owned restaurants.

Statistics show that BIPOC-owned businesses receive less business financing than white entrepreneurs, and those who do get bank loans have higher interest rates. According to the Federal Reserve, 80.2 percent of white business owners receive at least a percentage of the funding they request from a bank, compared to 66.4 percent of BIPOC owners.

Investment in BIPOC businesses leads to commercial property ownership, credit-building for individuals, and generational wealth.

Many BIPOC women in particular are launching their own businesses because corporate America does not tend to treat them well. Workplace bias leads to ongoing stress. There is a need to perform and produce at the detriment of mental health and physical well-being — commodifying one’s worth carries generational trauma for many.

Arielle Grant, founder of Render Free, told me: In the midst of a global pandemic, “we were grieving a public murder, we were participating in unrest in our streets. Wellness was so far off at that point. [There was no time to] check wounds. We stay stuck in that place of defensiveness.”

Says Hardy, “The responsibility to raise your hand to do better is important. It is not a game.”

Changemakers Alliance is planning a series of discussions with BIPOC entrepreneurs as part of our 2023 season. Sign up at tinyurl.com/MWPConnect to learn more.

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I have a vivid memory of being twelve years old, getting ready for bed. I put on my bright pink pajamas and noticed, for the very first time, the beginnings of an hourglass figure.

I immediately ran upstairs to show my mom. “Look, Mom, look! I have hips! Look at me!” The discovery of those hips was so exciting, that little bit of adulthood that I could finally claim for myself. It is one of the most joyful memories I have of my body.

Most of my memories of my body are not joyful. Nearly all of them are overshadowed by “diet culture,” which is rooted in the idea that controlling your body by controlling what you eat is normal. Diet culture emphasizes appearance over emotional and physical well-being, and it permeates every aspect of our lives.

Diet culture entered my life when I was in kindergarten. I do not remember why, but at six years old, I felt ashamed that I was taller and heavier than my twin brother.

Diet culture continued to impact me as I grew older. One of my childhood friends repeatedly talked about Weight Watchers, which her parents participated in. Another friend encouraged me to exercise with her so that we could lose our “baby fat.” Family members praised me for being thin. These comments warped in my mind, turning from “I am thin” to “Thin is good” to “If I am not thin, I am bad.” Over time, I began to struggle with my mental health and my relationship with my body.

By the time I decided to study nutrition in college, diet culture had created my insecurities and offered me the “solution,” which was to scrutinize everything I put in my body. It made me believe that there was a perfect body shape and size, and if I achieved that, I would be happy. In pursuit of this happiness, I undate and overexercised to the point of detriment to my physical and mental health.

I am grateful that one day, I finally said “Enough.” Diet culture had lied to me — treating my body this way would never make me happy. I was miserable, and I needed help. I understand now that I was struggling with disordered eating — obsessive, harmful, or abnormal behaviors around food and eating that do not quite meet the diagnostic criteria for an eating disorder.
My healing journey began with therapy. I worked to unlearn my disordered eating thoughts and behaviors, while also caring for my physical and mental well-being.

Relearning how to care for my body has not been easy. My healing has been supported by loving family and friends, a strong relationship with my therapist, mental health medications, and years of self-work and reflection. But my journey is also marked by my privilege as a white, straight-sized, able-bodied, and cisgender woman with access to medical care and a comprehensive college education in nutrition.

My healing has focused on allowing my body to exist exactly as it is, as opposed to critiquing it. I have come to accept certain truths about my body that have helped me heal.

• Bodies are not good or bad, and they are meant to change over time. The body I had as a 15-year-old and as a 20-year-old is different from the body I have now as a 25-year-old. My 30-year-old body will change even more.
• Diet culture ignores the fact that food and mental health are connected. Food is more than just fuel for our bodies; eating is an emotional experience. When we eat, we feel comfort, pleasure, joy, and connection to others. We cannot separate food from how it makes us feel.
• One of the kindest things we can do for ourselves is to give our body the nourishment, hydration, movement, and rest that it needs. We are always deserving of that care.

As I continue to foster these truths within my life, I have also been striving to rediscover joy in my body. Where can I find that same genuine joy that 12-year-old me felt when she discovered her hips? How can I bring that joy into my life without the influence of diet culture?

One way I seek out body joy is by appreciating what I am calling my “pandemic curves.” My body is a different shape and size than it was pre-pandemic. Diet culture would say that I did something wrong, that I need to fix myself, that my previous body was better than my current body. Diet culture does not want me to find joy in my body.

So screw diet culture.

Instead, I am honoring my body by giving it the care that it needs. I bought jeans in a new size and I love how they fit. I am confident in my relationship with food and my body in a way I have never been before.

And, for the first time in my life, I have cleavage. My 12-year-old self and I are celebrating together.

Natalie Nation (she/her) is a registered dietitian. She currently works in adolescent health, providing nutrition education and counseling to teens and young adults in the Minneapolis area. Nation lives in the Twin Cities with her husband, Paul, and her cat, Sweet Pea. She can be found on Instagram at @feedthatnation.
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M y pet comes to meet me at the door when I get home. He begs for attention frequently throughout the day. He sniffs my jeans when I have been gone for a few days. He will accept affection from anyone. And he is a cat. He is the most dog-like cat I have ever met.

Cats and dogs are often seen as complete opposites. One is outgoing; the other is reserved. One loves you; the other is indifferent. Dogs like to smell things; cats like to chase things. Yet as I have learned, the truth is that cats and dogs are much more alike in psychology and physiology than we might expect. Curious — like my cat — I did some research.

**Sight**

Neither cats nor dogs are colorblind, but their sight is limited. Humans and cats have three types of color-sensing cone cells in our eyes, but dogs only have two. An online tool called Dog Vision allows you to upload an image that is processed to show you what it looks like through your dog’s eyes — mostly gray, with some muted blues and yellows. Behavioral tests indicate that cats may also see fewer colors than humans, despite having the same number of cone cells.

**Sense of Smell**

Our pets shine in the area of smell detection. According to the book “Being a Dog,” by Alexandra Horowitz, a dog has 50 times as many olfactory receptors as a human does, and their brains light up when they smell their humans. Exact numbers differ between breeds, but dogs have around 200 million olfactory neurons, compared with 67 million for cats and only 15 million for humans.

Dogs love to go on “smell walks,” where they have the opportunity to sniff at everything they want to investigate. However, cats can distinguish between smells much better than dogs can. Cats have thirty variants of the scent-distinguishing protein VR1, compared to nine variants in dogs and only two in humans. Cats cover their waste to hide their scent from predators, but they can also leave it as a message — waste scent communicates information about the cat, such as whether it is male or female. A house cat can get stressed if its home does not have enough scents that the cat likes. This is also why your cat rubs against you and familiar objects in its vicinity. It is putting its signature scent on its territory, marking you as “home” and “family.”

**Affection and Personality**

It has been scientifically proven that both cats and dogs love their humans. Both kinds of pets usually prefer their owner’s attention over food or treats, even if they are hungry. Both kinds of pets are attuned to their owner’s moods and can become stressed if the owner is stressed.

Cats can be trained just as dogs can. It is a matter of determining what motivates them, which, like dogs, is usually social interaction and affection. However, not all cats are the same; some prefer socialization, some prefer food, and some prefer toys.

Cats and dogs have different personalities, just like humans. They can get separation anxiety and can be soothed by music and calming smells. Some cats have been stressed during the pandemic due to the inability to rest undisturbed because their owners are home all day.

Understanding why pets act as they do can help owners communicate with them, train them, and treat them. Most of all, it helps them love us back.
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Thoughts

I always loved my Mesoamerican silhouette.
I imagined that, like my ancestors, my face should be bindingly symmetrical
the high cheek bones of my Nana K'eri Emma
two golden sharp thrones
upholding my dignity, sitting royally to center the exacting equilibrium of my face.

My face, a Mesoamerican pattern of geometric embroidery
the triangular and rectangular beadings of long earrings
ready to adorn and showcase the conforming balance of my face.

All I knew and understood was geometry.

Closing my eyes, entering their parallel universe of sharp-edged diamond stars,
amidst the darkness,
I saw but only shapes.
Geometric explosions of turquoise blues, oranges and yellow hues.

I am supposed to be a pyramid.

Will the Mesoamerican figurines who speak to me in dreams
recognize the crooked, paralyzed me?
I long for red earthen clay
volcanic embers
sweatlodge rocks
sacrificial sweat
a reflection that smiles back at me in the shards of a cruel looking glass:

I am searching for me beyond the copal rising from the smoking mirror
the medicine, the magic, the pluck
to mold and reshape my face.

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