



Bring Your Body to Work

By Dr. Nancy Post

Earthworms in the Office

My eight-year-old son is studying earthworms. His zealous third grade fellows eagerly race to their science class, crowd around Petri dishes, and subject the poor creatures to environmental influences that would kill an elephant. The worms are prodded (to determine if they have nerves), warmed (to determine levels of heat sensitivity), frozen (to determine endurance), given – and deprived – of salt, sugar, water, air and light (to grade metabolic rates as they are effected by substances), and put in boxes with each other (to analyze social behavior).

During several weeks of experimentation, sleep is the only variable necessary for life that has been left untested, and that is only because the children couldn't figure out a way to keep the earthworms awake. All of the experiments are carefully monitored by the children, who have learned to adopt a detached, clinical view of their small brown subjects. "I could never do this to Ginger, our cat!" exclaimed Daniel, when I asked about how the earthworm might feel. "He's furry, and purrs, and I love him!"

In a child's view, one would never take creatures one loved away from their natural, open environment, enclose them in confined spaces, deprive them of the elements they need to thrive, and only permit them sufficient resources to enable survival. That would be cruel! Yet we submit to this reality daily in organizational life.

Two things strike me about this situation. First, that the children, at this age, feel separated enough from other creatures to be willing to subject them to experiments. Second, that the worms (and the environments of selective deprivation) remind me of office blocks filled with humans who work, often without access to natural light, fresh water or air, enough rest, nor the time to prepare and eat nourishing food. I don't think these two elements are unrelated. I do think they each have an enormous impact on the energy of the American public.

Dr. Nancy Post
Philadelphia, Pa
Tel: (215) 438-8590
info@NancyPost.com

Let's examine how detachment leads to deprivation. Then, let's look at how it links to natural energy.

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Suppose you are an office worker, a nurse, a banker, an accountant, a factory worker, a store clerk, or any of the roughly 140 million American workers (according to the U.S. Department of Labor – January 2005) who do not work at home or own your own business. Depending on your background, values and other commitments, you take your work seriously – sometimes over-committing to work and sometimes doing the minimum it takes to keep a job. For the most part, though, you want to keep your job. So you show up for work, use your skills, feel as good as you can (or even love what you do), and then you go home. During that workday, it is entirely possible that you work in an area without a window or with windows that do not open. Air is mechanically cleaned and re-circulated; light is derived mostly from fluorescent bulbs that emanate a faint green hue. Office furniture is most often made from treated metals. Water, if it's available at all, is either from a tap or filtered through a metallic cooler. If you are an executive or a leader, you likely stay in this environment in excess of 60 hours per week. You are an earthworm in a box. Or you may be a boiled frog.

A colleague once told me that if you throw a frog into a pan of boiling water, the frog will exercise its survival instinct and immediately jump out. By contrast, if the frog is put in a pan of tepid water on a stove, the temperature slowly rising to a boil will kill the frog, which sadly has adapted to the unhealthy surrounding conditions. Is this not the case with work-related stresses?

It is quite possible that you even enjoy your work environment because you enjoy what you do, appreciate the company of your co-workers, feel excited to get up, get dressed and go somewhere each day, and feel rewarded by your compensation.

You have left your body behind when going to work. Your mind likes being there, and, like the boiling frog, you probably have systematically turned off your body signals so that you do not feel the selective deprivation of fresh air, natural light, clean water or sleep. Our bodies, however, are more responsive than most work environments. If the work environment is, in fact, depleting, it won't take long before signs of it show. Hyper-alert, thirsty, sleep-deprived work addicts arrive, years later, at their acupuncturist's office asking for sleep cures (for accumulated yin deficiency). Rigid, time-stressed, hyper-focused people arrive for help with migraines (who have liver constraint, rising liver yang or wind). Overweight, nourishment-deprived workers who have grabbed fast food as a way to cope with pressure call and want a quick cure for weight loss. The chi deficiency among these patients is often complimented by blood deficiencies due to poor diet. Then there are those who realize their dilemma, feel demoralized by their circumstances, see the negative effect it has had on themselves (and their relations), and arrive with heart blood weakness – or worse, shen disturbances from years of dissociation. "Put your energy aside and work," says our culture.

This separation from life and life's needs is learned early, as I see with my eight-year-old and his classmates as they torture earthworms!

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Children aren't the only people living with a split between their bodies and their minds. Space planners and the organizational decision-makers whom they serve may also be out of touch with what it takes to thrive rather than survive. To a designer, natural light is a luxury; fresh air, an extravagance! The physiological experience of the office worker is either not included in the design criteria, or is minimally met. Having looked at many scale models designed by institutional architects and planners, I was always struck at how small-scale renderings of massive buildings rarely included people. At the time, I found this symbolically important. Now, along with many of you readers, I treat the casualties of this perspective.

In a culture so loathe to take collective responsibility for well being, we have generated a massive bill for health care. The more fortunate among us make our own rules and work in healthy environments of our own construction. The rest must, on an individual basis, discover ways to find balance and seek cures.

Originally published in *Acupuncture Today* June 2005