

Book Review

Teach Us to Sit Still: A Skeptic's Search for Health and Healing

by Tim Parks

2010, Harvell Secker (United Kingdom); 2011, Rodale (New York)

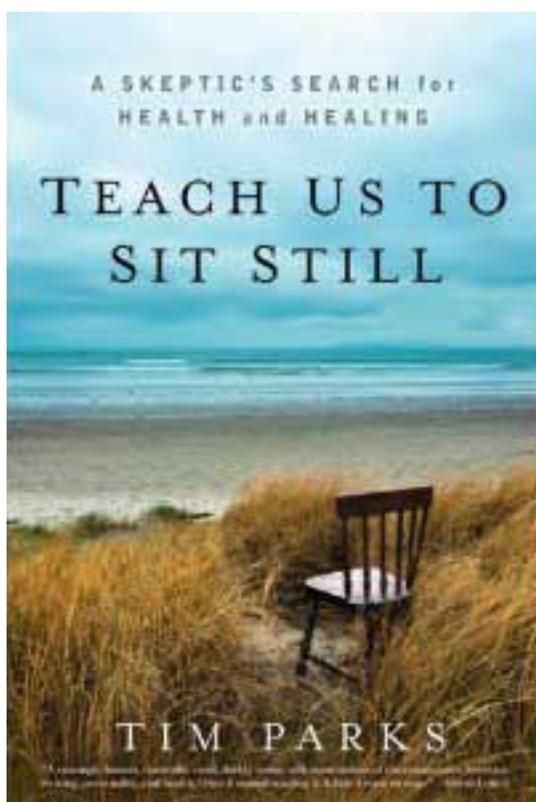
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I am still trying to remember how I found this book in the first place, but until I do I'll accept that this very Rosen-like book found me, in a synchronous way I'm learning to trust.

I want to share it with you because I found it to be a beautifully written, deeply candid inquiry into how pain and illness led one man to ask this question of himself: "Would it be possible to change *profoundly* in myself?" (165). The profound change that he comes to resembles the kind of changes we witness in Rosen clients: transformation as a result of heightened embodied self-awareness.

To get a flavor of Tim Parks, a well-established British author of twenty-one novels and works of nonfiction, take a look at his first words in *Teach Us to Sit Still*: "I never expected to write a book about the body. Least of all *my* body. How indiscreet" (ix).

I love the honesty of this and how he unself-consciously admits how completely he has lived his life from above the neck: "We have become cerebral vampires preying on our own lifeblood. Even in the gym, or out running, our lives are all in our head, at the expense of our bodies" (ix). And then one day, chronic pain

stops him in his tracks. Weeks before his fifty-first birthday, he faces up to the pain he has been tolerating in his abdomen, perineum, inner thighs, lower back, and penis—symptoms all pointing to something going on with his prostate, which he discovers when he finally decides to consult a doctor friend. Conventional medical wisdom says it's likely benign prostatic hyperplasia: with age, the prostate grows and chokes down on the urethra, causing difficult urination and other related aches and pains.

The book is divided into two parts. In the first part we follow him on his journey through the largely Western medical system, exploring a variety of treatment options. Research and doctor visits keep referring to a surgical procedure called TURP (trans-urethral resection of the prostate). This routine procedure is done in

countless men each year, and most everyone he consults is recommending it. Intuitively, though, he keeps circling back to what doctors are actually saying: there is no guarantee that his pain will be alleviated by the surgery. He cannot consent to the surgery. So he keeps searching.

And then one night at the computer, he lands upon a book, “an American self-help book” (104), he says disdainfully. It’s called *A Headache in the Pelvis: A New Understanding and Treatment for Prostatitis and Chronic Pelvic Pain Syndromes*, by David Wise and Rodney Anderson. He orders the book online, “the kind of thing Tim Parks doesn’t do,” he assures his readers and himself, pointing out to his wife that “the book was *medical*, nothing loony or mystical” (104).

Being a logical, bookish sort of person, he finds this to be a great discovery. Guidebook in hand, he sets out to teach himself techniques from the book: “*A Headache in the Pelvis* was determinedly pragmatic about what was happening inside me. Relaxing the pelvic floor, I had allowed blood to flow; muscles could begin to heal. As they did so, a more ‘hospitable environment’ was created for the nerves passing through them, which thus ceased to transmit pain” (160). Up to this point in his life, he has never encountered the term *pelvic floor*, much less understood its purpose or even felt its existence. Through the exercises (intriguingly called “paradoxical relaxation” by the authors) to relax those muscles, he begins to feel relief from his pain, at least for short spells of time.

As many of us may have seen with our Rosen clients, when relaxation and sensation come back to a place long held in the body, deeper awareness and feeling come as well, not always a consistent relief of pain. Sometimes, the sensation of pain is heightened. This is what happens to Parks:

Away from those relaxation sessions, though, what a physical shipwreck I discovered myself to be! What a bundle of twitchy nerves, poor posture and bad habits. The tension I had initially struggled to locate, eyes closed in the dark, complacently convinced that I was *not* tense, turned out to be *everywhere in every moment*. Not an inch of me, not a sinew or muscle, didn’t clang with tension constantly. No sooner had I stumbled on the tiniest corner of it, clenching and unclenching a muscle at random, than it reared up and overwhelmed me. I was *nothing but* tension. (163–64)

What I like about this book is that here we have a very bright (and articulate) guy. He gets it that he has only just scratched the surface of his tension and, maybe even more surprising to him, his lack of ease: “I was amazed, when someone showed me a way back to health, to realize that I knew nothing of my body at all, nothing of its resources, nothing of its oneness with my mind, nothing of myself” (xiii).

Eventually, he realizes that getting in touch with his physical shipwreck of a self is a much bigger deal than just fixing a “medical” problem. This journey becomes one of transformation to a new and different way of being.

In part two, his journey leads him to try other things to extend his periods of pain relief. He and his wife have been living in Italy for many years, and he finds a shiatsu practitioner named Ruggero. One day, Parks impulsively says, “Make me stand up straight, Ruggero. Please. Help me walk with my head up.” Ruggero answers, “The fact is . . . that if you want to stand up straight, a meditation retreat would be useful” (210).

After some initial resistance to the idea (surprise), Parks explores meditation, learning more deeply about how to relax and calm himself:

No longer much interested in standing up straight, I found my back pulling upright by itself. It happened over the spring. Taking my familiar run across the hills, I was surprised to find myself aware of muscles at the base of the spine. How odd. Days later I could feel my shoulders. A slight warm presence. Finally my neck. It was as if skeletal spaces had been very lightly penciled in. Becoming aware of the muscles turned out to be one with straightening them. Or letting them straighten me. I didn't do anything. I just had to pay attention. The only difficult thing was getting used to seeing the world from a different angle. (240)

I enjoyed this book because I found Parks to be such a trustworthy, honest reporter of his own experience. Here is a very skeptical, very "non-mystical" person; he tries everything Western medicine can offer him and still comes up short. Out of desperation, he decides to try things he would normally have dismissed out of hand. What he discovers completely floors him: there are mysteries about himself—about his body and mind—that he has never even imagined.

And in the end he makes a discovery that brings his heart into the equation:

Something in this business of sitting still, emptying the mind of self-regard, settling into your flesh and blood, . . . at some point it opened your heart.

There. I have used words that normally make me cringe. It opened your heart to the people around you. Suddenly you wished them well. Even people you really did not wish well. Now you did. However briefly. It brought down barriers and blurred boundaries. In your muscles first, and your mind. Inside you. Rigidities, routines. They broke down. The mind melted in the flesh. The gap between you and the breakfast utensils shrank, between you and the landscape, between you and the people sitting beside you. We were all on a level. (292)

Not even the savvy Parks saw this softness coming.

As Rosen practitioners, we have a whole range of clients who come to see us. We see people who have explored many medical and alternative options to heal themselves. And we see people like Tim Parks, who don't know what else to try, who have given up and are ready to surrender. I am most interested in this book because of the awakening we witness in Parks, as he moves from a very tense, highly intellectual man to someone willing to stop and watch his breath. And what he finally arrives at is the realization that it is quite okay for him to write such a self-revealing book, to share his experience with others: he gives us a funny, sometimes infuriating, well-written inside view of what goes on for someone who might well be like a client of ours one day.