



FROM PRINT 2003
Articles from the original print based newsletters of
Ralph Hadden - reformatted but not edited.

Surviving Chairs, Part 1

“Sit on the ground with me”

Chairs are everywhere. We sit to eat breakfast, then sit (in car/bus/ train) to travel to work or school. Probably we spend the working day sitting at a desk. In the evening we sit to eat dinner, watch TV or go out and sit at the theatre/cinema/sports arena. From cradle to grave we spend an enormous number of hours sitting in chairs, a behaviour unprecedented for most of human history. A life in chairs instills a limited movement repertoire with some muscle groups regularly being overused, others underused. The result is inflexibility, strain, pain, injury (especially in the neck and back), fatigue, inefficiency and loss of concentration. Possibly there is even a psycho-social and political effect of spending so much of life raised off the ground. However we can survive and actually experience more ease and comfort, be poised, graceful and productive in a world unnaturally dominated by chairs. This article (the first in a series) aims to help you find out how to survive and flourish in this “chair world”. It is based on my clinical work and classes particularly my “Surviving Chairs” workshops. – Ralph

Germaine Greer in her recent essay “Whitefella Jump Up” (in *Quarterly Essay*, 11, Black Inc. 2003) rather controversially proposes that the solution for the many social and racial problems of Australia is for “white” Australians to embrace Aboriginality. To begin this process she invites us to “sit on the ground with me, think.”



Greer is commenting socially and politically, not biomechanically but perhaps, without even realizing it, she is responding to a whitefella “chair culture” that puts us at a distance from earthy reality. We are, literally, on a pedestal, forced to hold ourselves up, at one remove from our human biological selves.

Personally I think there is some merit to Greer’s daring proposals, even though they are extreme and outlandish and have enraged many commentators. She is saying we should abandon the calamitous attempts to get aboriginals to adapt to white society and instead have us whitefellas admit to ourselves that we live in an aboriginal country and then begin to try to adapt to and absorb “blackfella” ways. However here, rather than making political comment, I want to respond as a movement teacher and to consider first the biomechanical implication of



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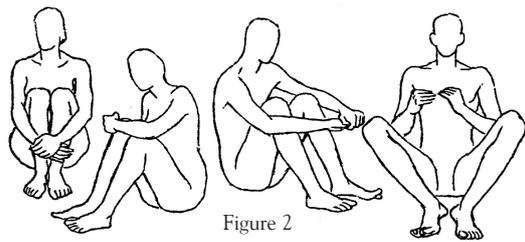


Figure 2

a call to “sit on the ground”. (I believe anyway that changes in human physical postures produce changes in thinking and behaviour which will then have political ramifications.)

Chair world

Every day in my practice I see (and touch) people who are physically harmed by sitting in chairs for long periods: muscle tension and strain, pain, neck and back injury. John Pierson has written in the Wall Street Journal that sitting in chairs causes most of the lower back pain that costs the American economy \$70 billion a year (quoted by Edmund Tenner in his “How the Chair Conquered the World” in *Whole Earth Review* Summer 1997).

I believe that one easy solution to this widespread difficulty is to simply spend less time in chairs, to get down on the floor, to sit, squat, lounge, sprawl, crawl and lie on the ground.

Admittedly it is a challenge to do this as chair seating monopolizes most work, domestic and social settings. You can’t, for example, sit on the floor to do your work in a busy office – well you could but I don’t think your “weirdo” behaviour would be tolerated for very long. However it is

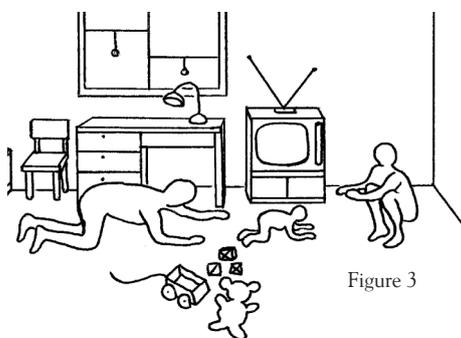


Figure 3

worth trying in situations where you won’t feel embarrassed- at home watching TV, for example.

Or try using a low table to enjoy your morning paper and breakfast while sitting on the floor (this is my favourite). Gradually finding ways to spend less time in chairs you will develop more flexibility and mobility and discover that it gets easier. Then you will find yourself in a “benevolent cycle” (as opposed to a vicious one): at first when you sit on the floor it is uncomfortable and difficult to stay there long ▶ it starts to get easier to be on the floor ▶ you spend more time on the floor ▶ it gets easier to be on the floor ▶ and so on...

Gradually the benefits spread to your standing, walking, carrying out your daily tasks and even to improvement in how you sit in chairs.

Rehabilitation

I know of an occupational therapist who ran classes for people recovering from a disabling injury or stroke. The patients could walk but still had severe postural and movement difficulties and so were astonished to find, when they entered the classroom, that there were no chairs!

Consequently, while the O.T. explained to them strategies for coping and recovering, they sat on the floor, straining and shifting, struggling to find a comfortable position, groaning about the hard time they were having and grumbling under their breaths about “why doesn’t she have the decency to provide us with chairs to sit on?”

But the O.T. was being very clever; she knew exactly what she was doing. By sitting on the floor the patients were shifting and changing through a variety of positions. It may have been uncomfortable but it was safe- you can fall off a chair but you can’t fall off the floor; and the end result was that her patients quickly moved towards maximizing their movement abilities.



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Accessing the ground

Often the first step in my clinical work with an infirm or disabled person is to enable them to get down on the floor and up again. For many elderly people there is a fear of the ground – they might fall and hurt themselves, or if they sat down on the ground they wouldn't be able to get up again. This fear leads to a freezing up of movement when standing and walking. Also, unfortunately, the floor is not utilized as terrain for maintaining flexibility and mobility. (In those parts of the world where it is traditional to sit or squat or kneel on the ground, people retain excellent flexibility at all ages).

So I start by teaching ways to safely, easily reach down and touch the floor, gradually lower oneself to the floor and easily stand up again from sitting on the floor. Once this achieved the elderly or disabled person becomes more confident, can stand more upright (rather than stooping to watch the ground apprehensively) and can make further progress as now the floor is available as terrain for exploration and exercise. The floor is not just for rehabilitation, it is the ideal place for learning movement in the first place, as an infant or toddler.

Children

Once, at a family gathering I saw a woman sit her toddler granddaughter in a chair at a table. She placed a pile of blocks in front of her and firmly (but kindly) told the child to play there while the grownups sat and talked nearby.

I watched the child teetering on the chair, obviously divided in her attention between keeping her balance and playing with the blocks – she was uncomfortable, struggling to comply but not really happy.

I made a suggestion to grandma and, with her agreement, invited the child to sit on the floor with her blocks. I went back with the adults but also sat on the floor. Immediately the child became more at ease and played happily. She sat in her place on the floor, playing with the blocks. Occasionally she would stand and walk to me,

bringing some blocks over, then walk back to her spot and play some more.

Safely on the ground her posture and movements became easy and fluid, she was able to focus on her own play and also observe and be part of the larger social circle in the room. In good time a toddler learns to sit easily in a chair but at that early stage, when you have only just learned to stand and walk, it's a long way to the ground from high up in an adult size chair. Better to spend more time on the floor, or to wriggle happily in the security of a loving lap, rather than teeter on a chair (or even to be strapped into one, as often happens). The ground is not just for children, it is a setting that facilitates interaction for all ages, as Germaine Greer recounts in her essay:

Sit on the ground and talk

Greer visited Alice Springs with Roberta Sykes in 1971 and was introduced to the people in the town camp in the Todd River.

...they let me camp with them. In the days that followed many of them walked quietly through the deep warm sand to sit with me on my mattress under the river gums, tolerating my insensitive questions, explaining kinship and the laws of avoidance, teaching me far more than I was then able to learn. I could feel all around me a new kind of consciousness in which self was subordinate to awelye, the interrelationship of everything, skin, earth, language.

Sounds like a friendly and free transmission of information. I wonder whether as much



Figure 4



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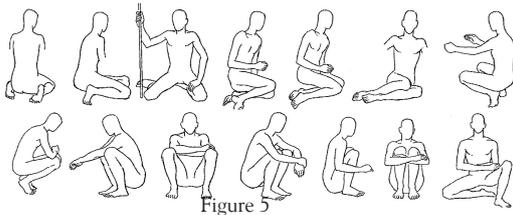


Figure 5

would have been learnt if the exchange had taken place on chairs around a table. In a more formal arrangement, as dictated by chairs, the social intercourse would have been more restrained and polite and there would have been less understanding, less good humour and spontaneity.

Further on Greer says: *Since then I have sat on the ground with black women and been assigned a skin and taught how to hunt and how to cook shellfish and witchetty grubs, with no worse punishment for getting it wrong than being laughed at.*

(I wonder what would happen if our lawmakers sat on the ground for their deliberations? I have a fantasy in which I imagine John Howard, Peter Costello, Simon Crean and all the other federal parliamentarians staging their debates somewhere out in the bush, sitting on the ground. Might as well have them naked too, or better still with loin cloths, ritual skin scarring and body paint. I'm getting a wonderful image here. And what wise, humane, sensible decisions would be made. Invading Iraq would be right out!)

Greer concludes her essay with the exhortation to: *Sit on the ground with me. Think.* I agree with this approach – to sit quietly on the ground, as many meditation disciplines teach, is to think clearly, with wisdom.

Sit on the ground and think

The Zen teacher D.T. Suzuki, in discussing Zen style sitting said *To raise oneself from the ground even by one foot means a detachment, a separation, an abstraction, a going away in the realm of analysis and discrimination. The Oriental way of sitting is to strike the roots down to the center of the earth and be conscious of the Great Source whence we have our "whence" and "whither."* (quoted by Edmund Tenner, op. cit.)



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Unfortunately many feel that sitting on the ground is undignified, they would lose status down there. That's true – to sit on the ground is to be humble, you can't be arrogant. But for the physical self it is a great relief (once you get used to it) to get down on the ground.

While sitting in chairs your musculo-skeletal is oppressed by patterns of over-use and under-use. Sitting on the floor, however, these patterns of muscle use come to a harmonious balance and in this more natural physical state you are humble, receptive to what the natural world is saying. Being more in tune with your biological self it is inevitable, I believe, that you will be socially, politically more enlightened and humane.

So please, join Germaine and me, sit on the ground with us, think.

Figure 6



Source of Illustrations:

Figures 1 & 4, Claude Levi-Strauss, photos of South American Indians taken in the 1930s, *Saudades do Brasil. A Photographic Memoir*, University of Washington Press 1995.

Figures 2, 5 & 7, Gordon Hewes classification of posture types, in *Scientific American*, February 1957.

Figure 3, Galen Cranz (1998) *The Chair*, Norton, 2000. (Wonderful book, by the way, written by a professor of architecture who is also an Alexander teacher – what a combination!)

Figure 6, contemporary Indian, www.caip.rutgers.edu

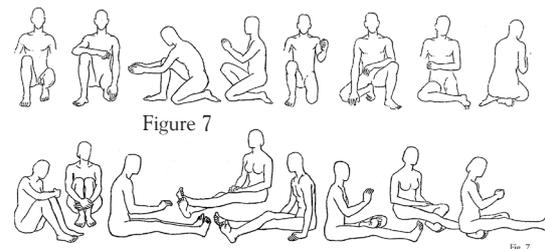


Figure 7

Fig. 7