

**the usa
body
psychotherapy
journal**



Volume 7 Number 1 2008

The Official Publication of

THE UNITED STATES ASSOCIATION FOR
BODY PSYCHOTHERAPY

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USABP Mission Statement

The USABP believes that integration of the body and the mind is essential to effective psychotherapy, and to that end its mission is to develop and advance the art, science, and practice of body psychotherapy in a professional, ethical, and caring manner in order to promote the health and welfare of humanity.



Alexander Lowen, M.D.

Dec. 23, 1910-Oct. 28, 2008

A student of Wilhelm Reich's in the 1940s and early 1950s he developed a form of body psychotherapy known as Bioenergetic Analysis with his then-colleague, John Pierrakos.



Becoming and Being a Bioenergetic Analyst Alexander Lowen's Influence in My Life

Philip M. Helfaer, Ph.D.

Abstract

The writer (Philip Helfaer) traces his development through the turbulent decades of the development of Bioenergetic Analysis and his encounters and trainings with the movers and shakers of that time. He traces his development from a psychoanalytic beginning to his most current understandings of and his own way of taking about embodied selves.

Keywords

Bioenergetic Analysis – Sensory Awareness – COSBET

Starting out and apprenticeship

I will begin by a small stream, known as the Eighteen Mile Creek, in western New York State, (near where I was born in 1933), a real place that in later life became symbol and emblem of my life. Here, as a boy and adolescent, I was most comfortable and alive, walking along and through the stream and in the surrounding abundant woods, traversing the same area on skis in the winter. By the time I was in college, fate took me to the intellect, the study of philosophy, until this intellectualized approach to life became unbearable. Hence to clinical psychology, but by no means not still in the intellect. Family therapy trainers bumped me out of my analytic orientation and turned me topsy-turvy for a while.

I write about what follows, not really for the sake of autobiography, but because I believe the story tells something about my fields, psychotherapy and bioenergetic analysis, and what it means to be and become a practitioner in those fields. It also gives some flavor of the kind of influence that a teacher can have, and for those of us of my age who went into bioenergetics. Alexander Lowen was the teacher, mentor, and the primary trainer.

One of the chance encounters in my life (1959) was with Myron Sharaf (Sharaf, 1983). Myron was then an instructor in social psychology at the Massachusetts Mental Health Center. I remember making a joke when he mentioned working with Wilhelm Reich. "Well, do you have an orgone box? Ha ha ha." We became and remained fast friends through the decades of the sixties and seventies.

Myron arranged a postdoctoral fellowship for me at Boston State Hospital, at that time still a big psychiatric hospital for chronic patients. One day he brought in a copy of Character Analysis (Reich, 1945) and plopped it on my desk open to Chapter XIV, "The Expressive Language of the Living." "Read this and tell me what you think," he said. I tried to read it and couldn't make heads or tails out of it.

Later – it was the sixties – I took a "vacation" at the Esalen Institute, California. Little did I know what I was getting into. No head-stuff here: Charlotte Selver and sensory awareness, yoga, encounter groups, Gestalt therapy. I receive a massage at the famous baths overlooking the Pacific: she is beautiful, we are both naked. I found myself crying deeply, a very uncommon occurrence for me. I "didn't know how to cry." My brother had died not too long before. I lapsed into an altered state with a sense of an energetic buzz around me. I realized she was chanting 'Om' over me. After I got up, I remained in an altered state. I walked down to the shore. Everything appeared alive, the ocean, the rocks, the sky. I had never experienced anything like this. All I knew was that it represented the direction to go in.

I went back east, began practicing yoga, and arranged for a three month sabbatical from the Boston State Hospital Adolescent Service where I had taken a part-time job after my fellowship ended. In the three months at Esalen, I got out of my head, grieved the painful loss of a woman, and an obsession around her was cured. Returning to Boston, I continued with yoga and added tai chi chuan, and I began to practice a kind of half-baked body-oriented Gestalt therapy. It was exciting, but I had no idea how to help people get from where they were to anything near what I had experienced at Esalen. I realized that, as far as I knew, the only people who knew anything about this were the people who had studied and understood Wilhelm Reich. Everything that I saw and experienced at Esalen I felt could be understood in terms of Reich's work.

Myron, Velma (we became a couple later), myself, and several other colleagues formed our own study group, "The Tuesday Group." We met at lunch-time every Tuesday. This was a great experience. At the beginning we presented cases. We were trying to learn about character and to work in a more or less Reichian fashion. This group was very lively and productive. We dropped the case presentations and took turns working with each other. One day, Velma worked with me and helped me to cry again. I worked out a lot of narcissistic craziness in myself in this group that went on for several years. To learn more, I began therapy with John Bellis and Terry Santino in Connecticut; they became my first bioenergetic teachers.

The Tuesday Group formed 'COSBET,' The Center for Organomic Studies and Bioenergetic Therapy. This was dear to my heart, and I think for all of us. We envisioned a new university of energetic and body studies. We established our own training program in the Boston area. We invited everyone. Al, John Pierakos, some of the other trainers from New York, John Bellis, Terry Santino, and Stanley Keleman. We ran these workshops for several years under COSBET and continued with The Tuesday Group.

This was all during the decade of the seventies. Socially and culturally, in many ways, it was a great period of time for me and my friends. The glum, meditating beatniks gave way to the hippies and then the flower children. Alcohol gave way to

marijuana, and then during the late sixties to LSD. I was at Harvard when Dick Alpert, later Ram Das, and Tim Leary started their “experiments” with LSD. I stayed away from it. I was well aware of how porous my boundaries were. This period was also the heyday of the Human Potential Movement, about which I had learned from Abraham Maslow. The upshot of all these cultural bloomings was that our practices flourished, and our “new therapy” was considered the best and most ‘in.’

With my then companion, I took a year-long sabbatical and went to California. I had seen two bioenergetic trainers in a workshop who seemed to know what they were doing, Bob Hilton and Renato Monico. I saw Bob for therapy for several months, got a feel for “letting down,” and got strong enough to go back east and begin therapy with Al Lowen.

Therapy with Al

Al had been scary for me. I encountered him in one of our COSBET workshops. He stuck his thumbs inside my jaws, pressing on the masseter muscles. It was incredibly painful and shocking, and I did indeed cry. Then Al instructed Myron to press into my occiput and I cried more while Al proceeded to talk about my character disorders. Fortunately, I didn’t hear this since I was in shock.

By the time I went to see him, after my work with John, Terry, and Bob, I wasn’t afraid of him anymore. I met him at his home in New Canaan. “I’m in pretty good shape”, I told him, “I don’t have any big therapy issues, but I’m learning and want to learn more.” This, of course, was sheer nonsense. I just had no idea of my traumas and character problems. We talked a bit, and he said, “It’s simple,... it’s simple.” I was a bit surprised by this and not sure that I found it comforting, but decided to put my trust in Al as the most knowledgeable, most real, and most down to earth of anyone I had yet met doing this kind of work.

When I remarked to him some time later about the effect of my first encounter with him, he said, completely non-defensively, “What did I do to you?” I told him. “In those days,” he said, “I was always trying to demonstrate the power of bioenergetics.” By the time I got to him, he had made a big change.

By now, I was several years into practicing bioenergetic therapy and several years into my personal work in individual treatment and in groups, including the Tuesday Group. Also, since the time of my first visit to Esalen, I had progressively and consistently added and increased the amount of physical and energetic practices in my daily life – yoga, tai chi, then bioenergetics, then running for exercise, and then, later, exercise at the nearest gym several times a week.

What had happened to me during this period of time was that my body became stronger, more flexible, more alive, and contained more energy. At the same time, my inner experience was turbulent; I had moved from depressive stasis to turbulence. The turbulence was fueled, in classical bioenergetic terms, by the breakdown of my muscular armor, increased energy flow, and increased capacity for expression and for charge and discharge. More recently, I’ve also come to understand that even ordinary exercise can activate old traumatic reactivity.

I still suffered bouts of depression, rage, deep injury and abandonment in my intimate relationship, and feeling isolated due to shame and humiliation. As my energetic system changed, I also had a terrible period of a few years with low back pain and muscle spasms occasionally intense enough to lay me up for some days at a time. The effects of all the energetic work I was doing was to energize my conflicts, activate muscular tensions, and enliven autonomic and limbic reactivity. Coming alive was not a gentle process.

Another relationship ended. I hit the darkest days of my life, around forty-six years-old. Essentially, what saved my life at this time – and I do mean that my life needed saving – were four things, with no order of priority: bioenergetic therapy with Al, allowing myself to connect with Velma, my dog Bodhatti, and my house in the country.

I experienced Al as a healing presence during this period of my life. At times, too, I felt as if Bodhatti were my only true companion in the world. Then, because I was more in tune with my body and how good I felt when we were together, I was able to be there as Velma and I found each other, and we were able to be together.

During this period, in a session with Al, I made the unexpected discovery of the experience of self-respect. I no longer remember the context of the session. I remember suddenly becoming quiet, just standing in the room with Al, who was sitting in the chair beside me. Probably I had been on the stool, maybe crying. I was aware of Al’s supportive and unobtrusive presence. Then I got it. I was me, just myself. All the terrible judgments fell away, all the shameful self-attributions fell away, and for a moment they all disappeared. Here I was, “just” in my body, with all my sorrows, faults, and pain, but I had myself with – and, in my mind, there is only one word for it– self-respect.

I was never inclined to use the term “self-esteem,” which has a psychological cast to it, as if I were, in my mind, esteeming my self mentally as another object. What I experienced was a simpler state and a deeper one, a bodily way of being. In that state of being I could tolerate the terrible affects that had assailed me, the shame, the humiliation, and the deep agonies of loss and abandonment. A year or so later (1984), I “found myself” giving a paper on “Sex and Self-Respect” at one of the conferences, and, never suspecting the concept of self-respect would become a life-long companion, published a book some years later using the term in the title (Helfaer, 1998).

How was I able to reach this healing experience in my work with Al at this particular moment? It did not come from him, of course. I found it in myself, and it emerged from my own work. I believe, however, the experience would not have been possible in Al’s presence if he were not somehow in a state to enable or be with it; many, maybe most, therapists would have gotten too busy with me too quickly to allow for the time I needed for this crucial experience. I felt from him an empathy for my suffering, and I felt seen by him. I experienced him as a positive presence, a companion in my aloneness. However, I believe there was also another more specific element in his way of being with me which I would identify as a kind of *respect for me as a*

living body. I feel that this kind of respect and feel for the living body is quite rare. For him, “I am my body,” has a real meaning. That meaning and that respect had registered within me, and at that moment I had my own experience of those states of being, and that experience fostered my healing path.

My therapy with Al covered a span of nearly ten years. Each session involved a day long trip from the Boston area to New Canaan, Connecticut, so I did not go every week. In addition to what I’ve mentioned so far, I do remember Al’s consistent work with breathing and grounding and occasionally specific work on other blocks in the occiput, throat, and pelvis. Although Al always wrote about character analysis, he did very little of it with me verbally. I would share my griefs and sorrows of the day, and get on the stool. I remember only one session which was occupied entirely with talking.

I remember saying often, “Well, I wouldn’t have gotten to this in an analysis.” I felt the emotional depth of what I had been able to touch, and I felt the healing influence of having been able to reach that place. One exercise Al often made use of during those years (the decade of the 80’s) was to have the patient over the stool exhale all his breath using a ‘ha-ha-ha’ sound that pulsates the diaphragm and hold that exhalation until the next inhalation bursts through spontaneously. This can be quite frightening, like a visit with death. One day I did this, holding out my breath for what I suppose felt like a long time. When my body began to want to breathe, my throat closed! I couldn’t get a breath! My body began to bounce on the stool, and I grasped the chair behind me with all my might. Suddenly my breath came in and on the exhale I roared with a horrendous roar and kept roaring. My pelvis was bouncing and pulsating and my whole body was transformed with an enormous wave of energy. Al had been able to sit there and hold on until my breath came. I hadn’t known if I’d live or die.

In my work with Al during these years, I felt I had encountered him at the best point so far in his career, and I still feel this. He seemed to feel comfortable with me, and we liked each other. This was the period during and just after he wrote *Fear of Life*, (Lowen, 1980), his favorite book. A new theme in this book was the “wisdom of failure”. I think he was in a comfortable position to help me relinquish the unrealistic ideals which had caused me a lot of suffering. He supported my masculinity in a realistic, “down” way, and helped me accept my “weaknesses.”

On Learning Character Analysis

I learned a lot from Al in these years. His ability to “see” the person, looking at the body as he listened to his or her story, was always impressive and often brilliant. I also was deeply impressed with the way he held the “truth of the body.” I saw nothing egocentric or narcissistic in this. Here was a man who believed in what he did and held what he did in a way that was grounded, real, and – so I felt – admirable.

I also saw Al struggle with his understanding of therapy over the years I knew him. In his autobiography (Lowen, 2004, p.142), he mentions coming to the realization that a lot of the work he was doing in his workshops was “demonstration,” and it didn’t go deep enough. He went through periods of doubt like this. One way he found to work with his struggles around the efficacy of his therapy work was to keep focusing on and developing his understanding of grounding, the energetics of grounding, and finding small variations in technique that would enhance the practice of grounding. I observed several of these changes in emphasis over the years, and learned from each one of them. He discovered one of these variations in his later years, after he retired from the institute. He called this variation, “connecting the feet to the earth” (see Lowen, 2004, picture following p. 96).

Nevertheless, learning character analysis and becoming a bioenergetic therapist was always a demanding ongoing project that required effort, concentration, focus, the continuous resolution of inner conflicts, and regular work with my body. From my first encounter with bioenergetics in the early 70’s until very recently, my professional goal was to develop a practical, functional understanding of character analysis. My impression was that despite the fact that bioenergetics was supposed to be a character analytic therapy, no one really knew how to do character analysis. It was perfectly clear to me that the character typology that Lowen developed (Lowen, 1958/1971) did not show how to do character analysis. It is a thorough description of the energetics of character and a handy guide, but more often than not, it proved to be a crutch that impeded observation and learning. Around 1986, Lowen said that he wished he had never written that book (*Language of the Body*).

To me, character analysis meant a seamless therapy grounded in the identity and antithesis of mind and body and in which the analysis of character attitudes and bodily armor both find functional expression in the therapeutic work. Bioenergetics was not to be psychoanalysis with some “bodywork” thrown in, nor, vice versa, a lot of body-work without the focus of characterological context and meaning, nor again was it an “integration” of “bodywork” and “analysis.” After a number of years, I managed to convince myself that I had pretty well reached my ideal, but I didn’t know then what I think I know now.

My quest to understand and become competent in character analysis was guided from the beginning by a very personal sensitivity that I suppose is a deep part of my personality and my way of being with others. I would describe it as a sensitivity to the quality of contact I’m experiencing with another person. As a therapist, I developed that sensitivity. Even pre-bioenergetics, after I got used to working as a therapist, I had a fairly keen feeling of what I felt in the contact. I learned to use that feeling to help me identify what was going on with the other person, whether it was some avoidant or angry defensive position or some deep underlying feeling which the other had not yet put into words. I understood what I was experiencing as a perception having to do with the surface form and style, that is character, of the overall expression of the other person. I related it to what I had found so meaningful in Reich’s “breakthrough” paper, “Psychic Contact and Vegetative Current” (Reich, 1945, Chapter XIII).

I believe my sensitivity to this aspect of relational experience has two sources in my development. One is the early loss of contact with my mother. Later, seeking restitution, I developed the practice of solitary walking in the forests near my home,

“communing” with nature, that is, enjoying the subtle sense of the thick stands of trees, bushes, and vegetation, bird song and other sounds, the feeling of the weather, and the sense of the nearby streams. The quality of this feeling would change from day to day and even sometimes from moment to moment. Occasionally, I experienced something vaguely akin to what I felt that day many years later at Esalen when the rocks and ocean became alive.

As I indicated, Al did not really do character analysis with me. There was no one as brilliant as Al in reading the body and working with the body energetically, but in an ongoing way, his heart was not in the psychological analysis of his patients. By and large, I felt I was on my own in trying to develop a bioenergetic character analysis. Although, like others, I modeled my work after Al, I also saw I was not Al, and could not work as a therapist as if I were him, nor did I want to. I knew, in fact, that I needed to develop my work as a therapist differently from his work first of all to be real and true to who I am. Equally important, I knew the work I did must accommodate the necessities of the actual, weekly, ongoing therapeutic process of the people I was seeing. For better and for worse, a lot of my learning occurred through my own ongoing working with my own character, either with myself or with Velma or my colleagues. Since I was in no doubt that I needed to continue to mature and heal, there wasn't much choice.

The whole effort to understand and develop character analysis became even more important to me when Al urged me to start a bioenergetic training program in Massachusetts. This created another big shift in my life and career. Up to then I was a “free-lance” therapist making a comfortable living, enjoying a good reputation, and I had time and money enough for vacations and my periodic sabbaticals. I had taken up backpacking in the summers and gone to some exciting places. For some years I counted on summer backpacking for adventure and refreshment.

Teaching is a way to learn, of course, and I did learn. Working with our training groups helped to bring the work alive, gave me the opportunity to feel through what I was doing, and to share excitement. Most of the students in those years were grateful for the training experience. We could see and feel the benefits provided by the holding environment of the group. We felt the sense of community in which work with the body, deep, meaningful emotional experience, and sharing all occurred and led to real growth. The workshop days were very hard work but usually very rewarding in terms of the human depth of the experience. One could see and appreciate the benefits of bioenergetic work and learning. Character and change in character came to life for all of us.

Sex and sexuality, for me, remained the central theme in my practice of bioenergetics, and it remains so to this day. Our training program kept this focus, and, I believe, almost all our students appreciated that focus. Holding the issues of sexuality, and for that matter, of the body itself, posed some conflicted feelings not just because of internal conflicts but because of the culture as well. With my professional office in Cambridge, Massachusetts, I was more or less constantly confronted, certainly in my own mind, with a conservative mental health establishment in which touch in therapy was frowned upon. Our bioenergetic society meeting place, in Cambridge, was just down the street from Harvard University, where I had been a graduate student. Across the Charles River in Boston were the great bastions of the psychiatric establishment, The Boston Psychoanalytic Society, The Massachusetts Mental Health Center, (where I had been an intern for a year), and other establishments. The very air in this city – at least for professionals – is heavy with Establishment and Academia. Heavy.

A wide range of experiences and developments profoundly influenced my learning about character and character analysis, some cultural, some more professional, and some very personal. As an example of a cultural influence, in the 80s, maybe a bit earlier, first slowly, then like a torrent, the whole subject of sexual abuse began to emerge from the dark, secret places where it had been hidden. Judith Herman's book, Trauma and Recovery, was published in 1992 (Herman, 1992) and became the clarion wake-up call to a to all issues of trauma and abuse. Alice Miller's books were published in Europe and America (Miller, 1979/1981, 1980/1983, 1981/1984). These writings were serious challenges to the bastions of the psychoanalytic and psychiatric establishments in Boston and elsewhere. The growing awareness of abuse was especially furthered by the feminist movement and various individuals and organizations that were part of it. At the same time, these developments supported bringing the body into the therapy process despite the resistance of conservative sectors of the mental health community.

In this same period, several prominent men in the Boston psychoanalytic and psychiatric community were legally prosecuted for violating sexual boundaries with patients, lost their licenses, and were bitterly shamed. I had had professional contacts as a student or later with a number of them, one of whom, as I had heard, had scorned my Esalen visit. A kind of ritual unmasking and cleansing went on, supporting a questioning of the legitimacy of the taboo against touch and revealing the hypocrisy running through some of the institutions that supported that taboo.

During this time, Velma and I, and other colleagues were aware we were working with people who had been badly abused as children – sometimes sexually, sometimes in other ways, sometimes both. Both Velma and I had become aware that our own family backgrounds were seriously abusive. In 1988, I presented a paper at the IIBA biennial conference titled, “The Hated Child” (Helfaer 1988). I tried to depict the emotional climate in which abused children lived, the effects on development of that hateful climate, and the ultimate effect on the personality. I described the “self-hate system,” and realized later that it provided a model for understanding shame and humiliation.

I took a sabbatical year and began writing. Sex and Self-Respect, The Quest for Personal Fulfillment was published in 1998. I wrote it basically for myself and Velma. I needed to write down what I thought I had learned by that time about bioenergetics and how and why I worked as a therapist the way I did. I needed to find a way to tell the story of what kinds of things we had gone through to have learned what I felt we knew by then. I needed to write about the hard tasks that each of us has to undertake in our adult life to find life, pleasure, love, and health. I did not care if it were ever published. I did not seek a publisher until it was completed.

This book brought together all the themes we had been preoccupied with for so long. I tried to depict an understanding of Reich's work, who he was as a man, and some of his roots and connections and contrasts with the Freudian tradition. I characterized bioenergetics as "seeing the person" and as based on the reality of the energetic processes of the body. I keep the centrality of sexuality both in development, with the concept of "identification with the genital," and in adult functioning as the development of the capacity for love, energetic aliveness, and the idea of "living your sexuality." The book held our personal and professional knowledge of abuse through the conception of the violations of sexuality. In the chapter on the couple, I describe the developmental potential and the potential for healing that lies in "the laboratory of the couple." "Living one's sexuality," could be a way of life.

Throughout the book I developed the concept of self-respect as a positive, body-based aspect of health, and illuminated shame, humiliation and guilt as the negative mirrors of self-respect. I discussed the energetic concept of the "vital connection" and a developmental schema for "a facilitating environment for self-respect."

To my mind, we had made a good start on the development of a bioenergetic character analysis based on a bioenergetics of the self. Bioenergetics was no longer anchored to "drive psychology" and Freud's theory of the instincts. The body is the self, and the self and its development are the focus of the individual's life and therapy. Sexuality and selfhood are two great functional organizing principles of the person. They develop together and are the same and different. Self-respect, (a body concept in contrast with the psychological concept of self-esteem), reflects a healthy development of the self, in contrast with a self suffering the effects of violations of sexuality and the resultant self-hate system or the shame-system.

As a boy and adolescent walking in the woods near my home, I dreamed of becoming a field biologist. In the last chapter of *Sex and Self-Respect* I managed to return myself and my work to my sense of the natural world and biological life. I suggest here that the societal attitude towards our sexuality is not so different from the societal attitude towards conservation and ecology. Our sexuality is our last great frontier for wildness, for connection at the deepest level with our biology and life. There are those who fight to save it – within themselves, if nowhere else – and those, in the majority, who sacrifice it to the production needs of their "economies."

When the book was published it was a watershed event for myself and Velma. Publication demarcated nearly twenty years of apprenticeship and learning. We were now in another phase.

Integrations and Individuations

In Boston, during the decades of the seventies, eighties, and nineties strong currents of change moved in the psychiatric, psychoanalytic, and psychological communities as well as in the culture at large. New vistas opened in all fields. In psychiatry, one of the earliest of these changes arose from the necessities of treating difficult "new kinds of patients," borderline, narcissistic, and other personality disorders, anorexia nervosa, and so on. This pressure elicited complex formulations and put great demands on therapists. In our private offices, we were not in the center of these developments by any means, but we were aware of them and had to encompass them to some degree. We recognized the limitation of our knowledge and expertise. Al wrote *Narcissism*, (Lowen, 1983), really an heroic effort to deal with some of the issues from a bioenergetic perspective. He also made a clear statement in this book about his sense of the craziness of the society we live in.

Feminism had a big impact on me. I awkwardly began to shed my patriarchal attitudes. I struggled within myself to find, as a male therapist, the maternal, the feminine, softness, a yielding interconnectedness, a relinquishment of logical goal orientation and an aggressive, phallic impatience. I was known as "incisive," "cutting" right to the "core of a problem," very quick and, unfortunately, sometimes quite impatient.

These and many other waves swept over us in turn; I'm not listing them all, and they continue. I do my best to incorporate the truths and realities of significant developments. My intention remains to keep my ground and my focus in the body and sexuality and at the same time to broaden and deepen. I am not talking now about "intellectual" movements, schools of thought, scientific models, or theories. These interest me, but secondarily. I am talking about deeply emotional impacts on my identity and my world view. Each time I encountered one of these waves meant some weeks or months of a personal change process as I grappled with some new aspect of my personality, character, and world view and tried to incorporate the resulting changes into my work and into the bioenergetic perspective.

Bioenergetic analysis, from my perspective, is and will continue to be a work in progress. As I see it, there is a core *theoretical* perspective. I call it the energetic point of view (Helfaer, 2004). At the same time, the task of becoming and being a bioenergetic analyst is an entirely personal matter. I'm trying to describe something about what it has meant for me to "B & B a BA."

Thus, following Al's retirement from the IIBA in 1996, I was motivated to continue to deepen my sense of my own ground in bioenergetics, confirm my own identity, and to stand by my deepest values. At the same time, the ethos of the organization changed and conflicts typical of any emerging and developing school of therapy arose.

Bioenergetics as Life Practice

My values as a bioenergeticist find their clearest expression not in any theory, but in my daily practice of doing a bioenergetic “workout.” I stretch, kick, work with respiration using the stool and other ways, ground, hit, work with the ocular segment and eyes, work with my pelvis, and follow whatever movements may arise. In recent years, especially after recovering from a treatment for prostate cancer, I’ve taken to doing at least part of this workout in the nude, and I deliberately invite and enhance the erotic aspect of the experience. The genital is, after all, a part of the body, and sexual aliveness cannot be fostered if it is ignored. These workouts can go for forty-five minutes to more than an hour.

On many, many occasions over the years, my workouts are truly therapeutic, and the daily practice is central to my healing journey. Deep feelings emerge, painful feelings are relieved and opened up through crying and energetic movement, realizations occur, breakthroughs, new understandings of the energetic process, clear anger, new experiences of the body, and more. It is an exciting process. For me, the daily practice of working with my own body is also the primary path for learning bioenergetics. How can I (or anyone) know how to work with someone else’s body, or even expect someone in therapy with me to work with his or her body, if I’m not consistently working with and in touch with my own body?

I believe it is the result of the consistent work with my body that a recent development in my work has occurred. This has to do with developmental trauma. During a recent summer something profound happened to me. I had the experience of emerging out of a state of trauma and shock arising from early life. It was a horribly painful and frightening process. I had not even known there was such a possibility. My previous understanding of shock and trauma had not been based on my own deepest experience, and my theoretical knowledge hadn’t helped open this up for me.

My experience of emerging was literally like the splitting open of a membrane that had surrounded me all my life – like a birth or coming out of an egg. Afterwards, I had a new, direct contact with Velma, other people, and the world that I did not have before. My understanding of my own experiences and life have changed enormously. I can see that my whole life has been dominated by repetition and the reliving of my traumas.

I am aware that I am not describing something new (Lowen, 1980; Bellis, 1985; Eckberg, 2000). It is my awareness that is different. My focus has shifted towards a viewpoint centered more on trauma and adaptation. These changes in view affect my sense of identity and the meanings of my experiences. Of course, my appreciation of the traumatic basis of character has deepened resulting in a different perspective on therapy. I want to mention that Robert Scaer’s work (Scaer, 2001, 2005) has been enormously useful in giving me, not only a picture of the neurobiology of trauma, but a picture that supports and enhances a humane and personal interpretation and understanding of my actual experience, and hence that of my patients.

I see that I, and many of my patients, need an experience of our trauma history that allows us to hold them in such a way that we can learn to live wisely with an intention to heal. Healing is a life-long journey. Healing is not curing, it is a way of life. It requires learning to manage our post-traumatic reactivity in such a way as not to undermine our own pursuit of happiness. The intention of healing may entail simplification, letting go, quieting down, and making do; it may have a spiritual dimension. Living wisely with intention may mean to learn to allow an enjoyable and meaningful way of living within the constraints of one’s own economy (energetic and financial), culture, realistic aspirations, and above all, one’s personal limitations.

I see too that the pursuit of happiness is of the utmost importance. The repetitions and adaptations attendant on trauma lead to a kind of addiction to suffering, self-defeat, and an entrenched self-hate system. The peculiar impact of developmental trauma leaves wide areas of “not-knowing,” and these blanks hold much power. The major challenge to a traumatized person is to learn to allow him- or herself to live enjoyably.

I have had to ask myself, what now is the place of the energetic point of view and sexuality? The issue here is the same as it has always been, really. Pleasure heals. Finding the road to allowing pleasure is part of the healing journey. Developmental traumas inevitably affect sexuality, in that they are violations of sexuality, often horribly directly. Even when the developmental trauma is in the first year, months, or weeks of life, the effects devolve deeply into the pelvis, genitals, and expressions of sexuality as the organism of the person matures. The cultivation of Eros lies at the heart of the healing journey for me.

Vital Connections

“Persons appear by entering into relation to other persons” (Martin Buber, *I and Thou*). So it is that who I am and who I’ve been becoming in all these years since entering on the journey I’m talking about occurred in the living grace of my vital connections: my therapists, my patients, the Tuesday group, the various training communities I helped to form, friends, and of course and above all my connection with Vellie. My bioenergetics has been a tool and a practice, and here I mean being a therapist, teaching, working with my body, my understanding of character and the energetic processes of the body. It has given shape and meaning to my identity, but it doesn’t live and pulsate apart from the matrix of vital connections that sustained me over the years. Nothing is more central to me, and to even begin to try to express it leads to a deeper and longer story, one that I am not able to embark on here.

Earlier I revealed that my sensitivity to and proclivity towards differentiating and experiencing my sense of contact with another was a major basis for my learning and doing therapy and then character analysis. Obviously, this is one way of talking about relatedness, about an aspect of my way of *being with*. *Being with* is my professional life, an immersion in the emotive flow of relatedness and the constant, conflictful, often painful dilemmas as to what is happening, how it feels, what it means, and how I might facilitate it developing into something that will at least do no harm, and better yet, will lead to development for my client, and inevitably for myself.

I tried to find out what it is to be a human being with another human being, what it means to be a man with a man, a man with a woman, to feel, to be affected, to allow the basic pulsations to develop and to be developed by them. For many years, I felt the most important job I had in life was to learn – if that’s the right word – what it is and how to love. This is what it meant to me to “be in my body.” In *Sex and Self-Respect*, I talk about the “laboratory of the couple,” and “the energetic milieu of the couple,” along with the idea that the stimulation of energetic, feelingful relatedness stimulates seeds of growth where they were left dormant.

In my training groups, I found small communities, with lives of several years. These communities deeply enriched my life, for example, the fifteen years in Norway. Here in Israel, where I moved to be with my community, we have a group who have been meeting continuously for fourteen years and counting. We continue learning, healing, and growing together. My heart is here and an evolving Jewish identity developing from ill-nourished early roots.

What can therapy do? If I undertake the healing journey, what can I expect? Therapy does not make people happy, it does not remove pain and suffering, and the “cure” we find is inevitably different from the one we looked for. Loss still hurts, and loss follows us from birth to death. Like others, I have found that what we usually think of as “wisdom” helps. The wisdom that matters, I think, is accompanied by an heroic attitude toward life (to face change, pain, the unknown, and death); a tragic attitude toward life (to acknowledge the damaging effects of our shortcomings); a stoic attitude toward life (to accept the reality that how we feel/think about something makes more difference than the thing itself); and a hedonic attitude toward life (to, in spite of everything, keep seeking happiness, and living with the belief that life is to be enjoyed.) When anything along these lines develop, that is, when therapy “helps,” we have managed to *be with*, me with you, you with me.

Consciousness, awareness, and the mind have their functions, and this includes the conscious representations in feeling and thought of the vital connections of which I am a part. As my energetic work evolves, it facilitates the coming to awareness of parts of my self that were left in the limbo of traumatic not-knowing. I’ve been helped in allowing the knowing to emerge by the work of Harold Boris (Boris, 1994). In talking about being and becoming a bioenergetic analyst, I’ve hinted that I am talking about what I usually think of as my identity, who I am in my own sense of myself, who I am to others, and who I am in the world. In this understanding, I’ve been helped also by the work of Dan Buie (Buie, 2004). It has been observed that people with identity diffusion may find the field of psychotherapy attractive for a variety of reasons (Sussman, 1992). You see me raise my hand in agreement. All that underlies this is another story.

And So It Is

And so it is that in “becoming and being a bioenergetic analyst,” I embarked on a life-long journey of which I could have had no conception when I started. As this journey has been happening for quite a number of years now, I’ve come to have a conception of it that I can express in terms such as these:

- Becoming and being a therapist is a uniquely individual process; at the same time, a frame for seeing and being is needed that is common and shared.
- With bioenergetics, I helped me to save my own life, become the custodian of my own ecology, enlivening and freeing, working through chronic contractions and over-activations of the autonomic nervous system (limbic reactivity, implicit learning, body memory, and so on), finding self-respect.
- My body is me, and I am my body.
- My life is a kind of flow, and the flow has qualities that I view as the energetic process of my body.
- Many, if not all, of my experiences in life and many of my choices in life represent repetitions of experiences encoded in my body via the conditioning of my central nervous system from childhood (traumas).
- It is possible, sometimes and to some extent, to help and be helped, or even on one’s own, to heal, find health, and to ameliorate suffering, but, in any case, this is a life-long process, it depends on *being with*, and the risks in undertaking it (for all concerned) with another are serious.
- Socio-political-economic life is deeply infused with elements inherently destructive to enjoyment, pleasure, and life itself.
- Life, itself, is sacred; “sacredness,” is a quality of contact.
- Sexual love, erotic connection, is sacred, the great gift of life, to be treasured and sought out in freedom, without suffering for it.

By the time I personally encountered Alexander Lowen, I had been for some time in the process of learning to be a bioenergetic therapist. I am in debt to Al and my other teachers for the therapy, learning, and growing they guided me through, indeed for the whole opportunity to participate in this discipline. In the course of the years, an identity gradually emerged and continues to be emergent and a process of healing as well. What I want to convey is that at this point in my life, and for some time now, my experiences, development, and learning, are me. The theories and the particulars of Lowen’s or other’s ideas, for example, and my therapies with Al and others, are all transformed in my own being and dissolved into who I have become, into my own identity. How I do therapy and what I write, for example, emerge from my identity, and that identity is uniquely mine, as everyone else’s is unique to them. What I call bioenergetics has become for me my own way of talking about and looking at embodied selves, me and you, as living expressions of consciousness and spirit emerging from the biological base of being.

At the start of this essay I implied a movement from a somewhat more embodied, grounded state as a young boy into a state of being split and attempting to adapt to life primarily through my intellect. The developments of the years of work and practice in bioenergetics are essentially the result of encountering the enormously complicated and emotionally tumultuous experiences that emerge in the effort to heal that split, to become more embodied. My real life now is felt as my bodily life; my real understanding of life is very much in terms of the energetic processes of the body. I've mostly quieted down from my traumatic overarousal, and calmed down overdriven ideals and aspirations. I like to breathe, feel, and be in my body. I might say, I have found within myself, and am more able to be in contact with, the pleasant flow I once felt following the Eighteen Mile Creek.

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Biography

Philip M Helfaer, Ph.D. maintains an independent psychological and bioenergetic practice. He is a member of the Faculty of the International Institute for Bioenergetic Analysis, and teaches in Israel and Norway, as well as the United States. He may be contacted at pmhelfaer@hotmail.com

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The Official Publication of
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