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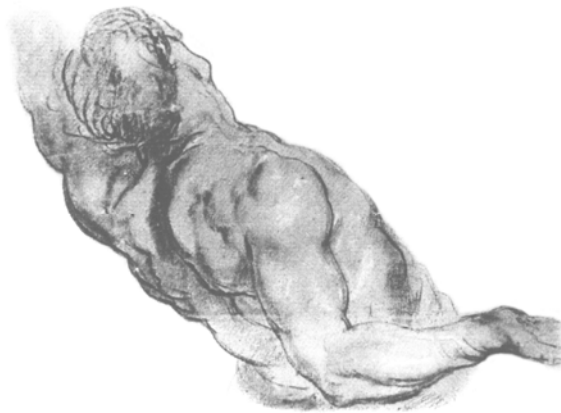


Volume 2 Number 2 2003

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 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. (revised October 1999)

In Evan's Case: Reflections on the Different Bodies of Psychotherapy

Scott Baum, Ph.D.

Abstract

This article provides case material as a way of exploring two related themes. The first is the use of a theoretical and technical model in psychotherapy which embraces and builds on a somatopsychic viewpoint. The second focuses on the dynamics of father-son relatedness in individual men and as a social force. The article remains mainly rooted in the work of this particular therapeutic outlook, but also attempts to draw conclusions relevant to the field in general. The dynamics which infuse the therapy of this particular man are seen as reflections of his relationship with his father. Those dynamics are also examined for their relevance to social forces which are part of the formation of the structures which contain and shape the interpersonal relationships which give expression to those same dynamics in the world.

Keywords

Evan's case - Interpersonal relationships - Social force - Somatopsychic

Evan is a youthful middle-aged man, living a somewhat unusual lifestyle, who first came to see me about five years ago. One of the most striking things he said to me early on was something said to him by a therapist he consulted briefly before coming to me. She said to him at one point that he never seemed to feel anything. When he told me that, I heard in my own fantasy the faint echoes of exasperation and impatience, as though it was maddening to her that he was like that. Besides my unappealing tendency to self-congratulation and to comparison with her on this score, I also did not share her experience (as conveyed by Evan) that he was not feeling anything. His communications felt very meaningful to me. I was touched and affected by him and them. I was following an experiential path when he talked, something was happening in me and between us. Which is not to say that Evan's defensiveness and intellectualizing style have not been a part of living with him, both in individual, and in group sessions.

In viewing this aspect of my experience with Evan, I am reminded of another client whose therapy with me was cut short when he moved out of town. With him I felt as he talked, and we rarely did anything but talk—occasionally, some active body-focused interventions—that I was in a deep contact with a very meaningful, and for me often very moving process. In the world of active and body-oriented psychotherapy there is some overt, and quite a bit of latent mistrust of this kind of experience. The absence of strongly experienced and strongly expressed feeling casts doubt on the authenticity and depth of the process within the client, or between the client and the therapist. Yet my feelings with Evan and with the other client were in my body, tangible sensations. Was I being fooled somehow by Evan's defensive organization, or by my need or wish to ascribe to his communication meaning which was not there? Or am I simply limited in my ability to plumb the depths of true, deeply felt experience?

The way I will frame the larger question for this paper is: which body are we working with when, as psychotherapists, we do body-work? Evan's case offers a number of perspectives on this question. The question is a serious one for bioenergetic therapists, of which I am one, because there are strong attitudes in the community of bioenergetic therapists, as there are comparable attitudes about other principles, in groups with other views, about what constitutes authentic and proper body-work, and body-oriented psychotherapy. One can, in an effort to shore-up one's security, see these attitudes as a nuisance, something to be brushed aside as one strides confidently forward to do the work one believes in. But for many of us, myself included, that would be a self-deluding defensive maneuver sure to backfire in some way in our work. Much more is going on here, and is at stake, than an adolescent-like struggle to be like the grown-ups and be able to carry oneself with assuredness as an equal to them. I think that Evan's case, in its revelations about the role of fathers in squelching and trampling on their children's unfolding selves, speaks directly and forcefully to the dynamics informing the development and expression of these critical attitudes, and illuminates their destructive effects.

Evan's Three Lives

Evan lives two fairly discrete lives. As I am writing this, however, I realize that it is more accurate to say he lives three lives. He is a professional working in his field in a somewhat peripheral very low-key way, although by all accounts very competently. In the rest of his life, which forms by far the majority of it, he is a seeker, a student, pursuing various disciplines in philosophy, martial arts, and music. He is looking for "balance" and "harmony," and he expends extraordinary amounts of time and energy in various practices designed to teach and train himself in the development of those sought-after qualities.

Now I realize he lives a third life, which has the coherence of the other two. This is the life that actually prompted him to seek psychotherapy. In it he engages in relationships with women who have elements of dominance and submission. When he first came to see me he had just read of a book that suggested that such relational patterns may have their origins in deeply held, often unconscious, fantasies. He wondered if that was true for him, and he was looking for a way to explore that question. It is not surprising to me that this third life stayed somewhat hidden from view. It has only sporadically been at the center of our work. Recently, for the first time, Evan's relational life in the present has come more clearly into view. But this more hidden aspect still remains a largely undifferentiated nub of feelings and dynamics and attitudes.

These three lives hardly touch each other. There is some diffusion at the boundary between Evan's personal life and professional life. He dresses and grooms himself somewhat unconventionally for his work, and people know he marches to a different drummer, but few in his professional world know how different. The third life may be known only to the women involved, and to him and me. Much about Evan is concealed, for in his earliest days he had to learn to cover and hide whole parts of himself in order to limit his exposure to the unrestrained, pervasive, brutally delivered criticisms of his father.

Although the third life has occasionally surfaced in our work, until recently it has not occupied a central place. The change found expression when Evan said in a group session that he had come to the conclusion that intimacy was actually a thing in itself, a real thing. He envisioned the domain of intimate contact as a room, one in which he did not reside, but to which he could now see a door, and which he was determined to make an effort to enter. This statement drew a heartfelt response from a woman in the group, who told him she thought this was truly a momentous decision. After seeing and feeling Evan thwart the group's sometimes prodigious efforts to join, confront, and be with him, it seemed to her this commitment was a substantial change in Evan's life.

There is a paradox at the center of Evan's life. He pursues avidly, at great expense of time and energy and to the exclusion of other pursuits, a set of practices and disciplines that he hopes will bring him into greater harmony with the forces of the universe. It is understandable to him that the medium for the development of this harmony is his own person, somatic, psychic, and spiritual. The painful reality is that he is not intimate with himself, and so the practices he engages in are an externally determined technology, which if followed carefully and diligently enough, should yield the outcome desired and predicted by those who teach and espouse the principles underlying the practice. In fact, it is an ever-receding horizon, in which expended effort brings him to new ideas and skills, but no closer to himself.

Frequently during our work Evan would question whether the search for harmony could be advanced by psychotherapy in general, and by my approach in particular. It is only very recently that Evan has come to the conclusion that understanding the historical roots of his present behavior and reactions might be useful to him. Previously, he often spoke openly about a surgery-like process that would remove from him the unwanted parts, even though he was not exactly sure what those parts were, or exactly why they were unwanted or undesirable. When he talked this way, I was often reminded of Stanley Keleman's description, in a workshop, of a dialogue with someone in which he asked whether the person would amputate his left arm if something was wrong with it. He went on to note how this way of relating to oneself is to behave as though parts of oneself are garbage to be discarded. My insistence in following this line with Evan confounded him because of my unwillingness to fulfill the role of authority who would instruct him in the way to perfect himself. My preference has been to pay attention to things and try to apprehend their meaning. It has not been easy for him to come to terms with my dogged refusal to become a master, but he has increasingly expressed an appreciation for my position and its underlying existential base.

In the Family System

Evan's father, also a professional in the same line as Evan, was an abrasive, critical, dismissive man, who had no compunction about venting himself on any and all around him. Evan did not react aggressively and overtly to this treatment until early adulthood, when he essentially fought his father to a standstill. Before that he preferred to lay low and conceal himself as much as possible from his father's view. This could not have been easy. Home movies made of Evan from early childhood through to early adulthood show a strong, attractive child growing steadily into a strong erect young man. Perhaps significantly, in the one scene of Evan playing sports, he is seen in early adolescence playing basketball with his mother, who is obviously enjoying this activity with her son.

Evan's descriptions of his mother were, until the last year or two, focused almost entirely on his experience of her as "overprotective." He saw and spoke with her often, but always recounted his contact with the complaint that she hounded him with her worry. He wondered if she was simply living out her cultural identity as a "typical Jewish mother," or whether there was more to it. One breakthrough came when he talked about an illness that had befallen his mother and his efforts to counsel her about possible treatments. He realized that he felt hurt and angry that she seemed so unreceptive to his advice because he felt that she had no faith in him and his ability to know things and make good judgments about them.

The other breakthrough in his understanding of his relationship with his mother came when he was talking about how he would react to her death, which considering her age must be regarded as approaching. In the midst of his complaints about her, and his chafing at her over protectiveness, it suddenly became clear that he loves her, deeply, and she him. Suddenly, the mother of his childhood came into focus. This was the woman I saw in the movies, a very attractive, lively mother very actively engaged with her son, and from all the available evidence loving him very much, although unable to stand between him and her overbearing, critical husband. Something must be said for her strength even in that however. In late middle-age, with her children grown, she left her husband, and, after a while, took up with a widower, a man whom she had nearly married in her youth. According to Evan, they spent seven very pleasurable years together. It has been interesting in recent sessions to look, for the first time, at the patterns in Evan's mother's life, as they unfolded and affected Evan. What was no more than a photographic negative of her has begun to develop into a fully realized picture.

To some extent Evan was able to hide from his father because his older sister, the eldest of the three siblings, presented such a large target. In the movies she can be seen as an irrepressibly energetic child, commanding attention by the force of her presence and behavior. Evan spoke mostly of the conflict with this sister, of her abrasiveness and dismissiveness. It came as a shock when in speaking of her recently he said that he missed the closeness they had had for so long. They formerly talked often and deeply about many things, but this had broken down substantially over the past few years, in part, from Evan's side because of his sister's treatment of their mother. Evan felt he understood his sister's anger and resentment at their mother. After all, his mother had not only not protected his sister from their father's withering contempt and hostility, but, as she also confided to Evan, she could not abide the rawness and force of her daughter's energy. At the child's birth she despaired that such an unpretty, unpetite, unruly child could be her baby. But Evan still found his sister's frank, rough, loud anger at his mother, partly driven by her feeling that he was preferred by her, to be abusive and needlessly harsh and humiliating. Until recently, Evan simply recoiled from his sister's competitive and superior attitude. He is now considering her behavior in the light of his understanding of his father's effect on him, and he has begun reaching out to her.

Evan's younger sister has made few appearances in his therapy. She seems to have been a more timid, softer, and unassuming person than either he or his older sister. However, one notable sequence of events occurred with her and her family. It is worth describing those events here because of the light they shed on Evan and on the family patterns and systems which came to bear on him and formed him. Evan informed me one day that his nephew had been hospitalized on a psychiatric unit after he had struck his father during an altercation. As Evan described the relationship between father and son, the father was always very harsh and critical with this son, although he has been very enamored of his other son who is an excellent athlete and matches his father's interest in, and enthusiasm for sports. Evan told me he identified strongly with his nephew in the hospital, that he was the person most like him in the family. His nephew is a sensitive young man interested in music and meditation. Once again I discovered a hitherto unknown strong emotional connection in Evan's life.

The young man was diagnosed as having a brain disorder called schizophrenia and placed on heavy doses of medication. His mother was told that he would most likely have to take these medicines for the rest of his life. The facts of his conflictual relationship with his father, and that his parents had been unable to insist that he leave home and start a life on his own despite their resentment of his seeming indolence, were not explored. Evan's nephew occupied a central place in our therapy for awhile, in large part because I could not contain myself and initiated a number of conversations about alternative ways of understanding what happened with him and alternative treatment possibilities. Although Evan found this both interesting and useful, his sister remained adamant in sticking to the views and recommendations of the psychiatrists she had consulted. She herself has been in psychotherapy for many years. Evan made a number of contacts with his nephew during this time, who told him that Evan was the only one he felt spoke the same language as he. But soon no further mention of the nephew came up. The nephew was discharged home, and his parents set him up in an apartment. I believe he entered a rehabilitation or partial hospitalization program. It was as if he had dropped of Evan's radar screen. Just recently (at the time of this writing) Evan mentioned as an aside to something else, with no further comment, that his sister had left her husband.

Evan in Group

This kind of on-again, off-again quality is also evident in Evan's behavior. Many times in group Evan would engage the group in an extensive discussion about something. People would actively enter the process with him calling his attention to things and striving to make themselves heard by him, hoping he would see himself through the lens of their feedback and perception of him. The first times this happened people came to it with optimism and hopefulness. However, each time it would end with Evan somehow not understanding what people were saying or how to comprehend it, asking for more information and more clarification when he had not even taken in what had been said, with much effort and feeling, already. Mostly Evan was befuddled by what happened and

could not understand nor empathize with the annoyance and frustration of group members. Only in a few instances did the dynamic underpinning of his defensive operations show through. That happened when Evan described incidents in which others did not display what he deemed the appropriate deference to him. Another breakthrough awareness came when Evan realized that he was not an innocent victim of manipulative, high-handed, arrogant taxi drivers, but rather that he actively awaited and pursued the confrontations through which he could vent his indignation and outrage. He was, in fact, a "player" in these and other similar interactions.

On the other hand, Evan once revealed to the group his participation in a practice which, because of the substances used in it, caused a strong reaction in a number of the members. Although the members of the group were people who usually strive to be progressive in their outlook and tolerant of difference, there was a sudden upsurge of critical condemnatory talk. None of the feedback or reaction took account of Evans considerable experience and grounding in such practices, and certainly did not reveal any respect for or acknowledgment of his vast background of study and experience in these areas. To Evan it seemed the group had behaved like his father, blindly and cavalierly expressing prejudice and ignorance, and like his mother, showing no recognition of the maturity or faith in his judgment. Evan simply folded-up on himself and that part of him disappeared like an island swallowed by the sea. He did not become angry or resentful. We only talked about it a couple of years later when I felt it was timely to bring up my observations of what happened in that group. I raised it in the context of his burgeoning awareness of the profound effects on him of his father's treatment of him and his puzzlement that he "remembers" so little of the actual early childhood experiences with his father. Here was an example of how he dealt with outrageous treatment when he was vulnerable. He withdrew his energy from the field of the contact, like a pseudopod, back somewhere into his center or core, and he did not even register what caused him to do so. He had been there for a moment and then gone, without the event leaving a trace in his awareness.

Evan's Body

The same quality of absence and presence is a part of Evan's somatic reality and presentation. Evan is a nearly classical example of a person with a rigid character organization. He stands tall and erect, his contact is plain and straightforward and somewhat reserved. In a very narrow sense he is very well grounded. He makes good contact with the earth and the environment around him, but he constantly acts on that contact by interpreting what is happening in terms of the fragility of his ego. Thus there is frequently a paranoid tone to his perceptions of others and what they mean to be saying to him. And he uses his eyes that way: he looks out through them, not seeming to let much flow in. As a child he made a tic-like movement with his eyes and face. It gave him a certain kind of relief to do it. His father would deride him for doing it and tell him to stop. When he repeated the gesture in the group it made him seem softer and more childlike. His chest is expanded, voluminous, and strong, but it is difficult for him to breathe all the way to full expansion, to that point where the inside is as full as it can get and there is release into the full breath. It is as if breathing that fully would bring his inner reality too close to the surface.

Evan's back is straight and he appears, and is, quite strong. But he has a weakness in his lower back that he has to favor. This weakness seems to me a reflection of the fact that Evan's sexuality and aggression have not joined. He could not risk frank aggression, his father would have crushed him even more; he could not love his mother openly, tenderly, and aggressively, neither she nor his father could have stood that; and he could not simply identify with his mother and give up his masculine thrust in its culturally sanctioned form, his father would have withered him with ridicule, and his mother did not want it from him. She wanted him to be strong, although the triangle of he, his mother, and his father must have stimulated considerable anxiety in all of them, and more envy and competitiveness in his father. His mother could not teach him to surrender and could only reveal the depth and force of her passion for him in her over protectiveness. He could not meet and feel safe in her powerful loving, he could only feel he was submitting to her and risking smothering. He could not turn to his father for a hand to hold him above the water of the emotional flow if it were too much. So he built an inner container to hold everything in and back, and out, if it is already outside.

The container is formed in part by the layers of voluntary muscle near the surface of his body. He was lying on the bed breathing in one session and noting his difficulty in taking a full inspiration. It was as if his ribcage were frozen in mid-inhalation. Noticing that led him to talk about how it is impossible to live in fear and humiliation, and how he had rigidified to hold up under the assault and at the same time make himself still so that he would disappear and not be so obvious a target. I worked a little bit on the scalene muscles in his neck, and especially where they enter behind the clavicle and fan out. His muscles were like stone, and with no give in them whatsoever. I can imagine him now as I think about that; in my fantasy I see him in full flush of rage, the cords of muscle in his neck taut, his jaw jutting. But he seems a long way yet from any such expression, if it is actually an accurate image.

The Language of Music

Since he has stayed largely unaware of his vulnerability, Evan has remained fairly impervious to feedback about his behavior which would cause him to notice the underlying feelings actuating his behavior. This isolation from the flow of inner, visceral, and emotional reality became starkly revealed in Evan's musical life. I knew for quite some time that Evan played and studied a number of instruments, and that he had briefly tried his hand at playing in public on a small scale. At one point in therapy when he was talking about his difficulty containing and expressing his emotion, I suggested he consider bringing an instrument into a session, an idea which he embraced. When he played, I was dumb struck. He played guitar, and first played a light lively piece, and then a blues tune. The music conveyed feelings powerfully, movingly, and with nuance and sophistication. It was as though he had begun speaking another language mellifluously and with feeling that I could instantly understand. I was astounded by the unexpected facility and skill at the expression of emotion. He was surprised and gratified by my response.

After that I suggested he consider bringing an instrument and playing in the group, which he eventually did. He played and sang a song that he had composed on the death of his father. He seemed not as free in his emotional expression in the group, which may be related to his discomfort and anxiety about playing before an audience. Perhaps most significantly, he has not brought an instrument to a session since then. This seems meaningful in the light of his ability to convey emotion in that medium which otherwise eludes him.

Embracing the Fear of Death

This may well reflect Evan's constant effort to assert control over his emotional life. This effort showed up very explicitly in his recent discussions about death. Evan recently had an experience which brought him into contact with a deep panic in him which he associated with fears of suffocation and death. As a result of that and other experiences he decided to prepare himself for his own death in such a way that when the time of it came he would not be panic-stricken, taken by surprise by his fear or dread. He was going to do this by banishing his fear, reaching a state of calm equanimity in the face of his demise. The intensity of his drive and pressure to master his fear was palpable. The issue for him was the dread of being humbled, made vulnerable, and feeling humiliated by the presence of his fear. It was that which he intended to avoid. It was again a surprise and revelation for him when it was suggested that embracing his fear might constitute a more real response to its presence in him. This idea of embracing what is, as distinct from what is not, always takes Evan somewhat aback, and yet brings him some relief. Despite his interest and knowledge of Eastern philosophies and viewpoints, his character organization invariably brings him back to a model of life in which one masters and controls people and things from the top down.

A Different Theoretical Model For Body-Psychotherapy

Evan is like an egg. He has a hard, durable, but relatively inflexible outer shell, made up by the surface of his body, and the striate musculature. He has some more fluidity in the middle layer; one can see it in the grace and flow of his movements as a martial artist. And he has an inner core of feeling and passion—a yolk, self-contained and segregated from the other layers, although contiguous with them. Evan has resolved his oedipal conflict in the classical sense, he is very much like his father under the veneer of his alternative lifestyle, and relates to the yolk part of him very much as his father would. It is something to be kept under control and treated with contempt. Incidentally, Evan's father was an artist also, though he worked in a different medium.

It is a grave flaw in bioenergetic theory (Lowen, 1958) that the only successful resolution of the conflict between fathers and sons is through the son's identification with the father's castrating intimidation of him. Evan gets frighteningly angry with people in positions he views as subordinate to him, if they are not properly deferent. But when he encountered a master teacher who was arrogant, high-handed, dismissive and contemptuous, he was full of forbearance, and rationalized behavior that to others of us in the group seemed outrageous. To posit that a successful resolution of his conflicts related to his father would be for Evan to be able to do it back harder to this teacher is to doom us to a never-ending cycle of intimidation and counter-intimidation.

Evan liked the idea of somatically based interventions. It accorded with his beliefs about the unity of mind, body, and spirit and it fit with his lifestyle of developing a discipline and following it. However, it became clear in time that the end point of the development coming out of following the discipline had to be foreordained. He had to know where he was going and whether that was the right place to be going in the way he was getting there. In a way unbeknownst to him, he seems to have internalized his mother's anxiety about the dangers that can befall a person wandering through life, and he was determined, as she was, to control those dangers. Somatically based interventions often are intended to destabilize existing defensive structures and patterns. To then expect those

interventions, as Evan needs to, to lead to predictable knowable outcomes, is to rob them of their vitality, of their ability to surprise and enlighten.

Evan's basic defensive style is incorporative. Either he takes things in whole and immediately controls them and their meaning and effect; or he rejects them completely, hardly tasting them. Behaviorally, his defensive maneuvers remind me of the scenes in science-fiction shows where the weapons officer on the bridge informs the captain of whatever vessel it is that the enemy has matched the frequency of the vessel's offensive or defensive systems and so rendered them ineffective. If Evan were offered an experiment in breathing, for example, it would disorganize him briefly, if at all, and he would immediately take over the experience, modulating his breathing to fit some pattern or teaching he knew about. His well-organized, muscular body, coupled with his extensive experience with processes designed to alter one's consciousness, enables him quickly to take the new input from the experiment and configure it to fit his already known ways of looking at things. Every so often, a somatic intervention will have a strong effect before Evan's ability to absorb the energetic impact takes over. Working on his back muscles until he can take a deep full breath touched him deeply. So too did telling him the scalene muscles on the side of his neck and entering beneath his clavicle were like rock. He asked what I thought that held tension was related to, and I told him I thought it reflected a profound rage, outrage, really. In my mind's eye I saw someone bellowing at someone else, the muscles of his neck engorged, filled with charge. This image, and the experience of tension going deep into the middle layer muscles of his body, also seemed to affect Evan.

It is the interpersonal contact with me, or members of the group, or his report of such a contact outside the therapy, that seems most likely to unbalance Evan's finely-tuned defensive organizations. His willingness to expose himself to the indomitable experience that there are other realities in the world is what most rattles his character structure. It is not that Evan never feels anything. It is that he categorizes, explains, controls, and intellectualizes what he feels before it becomes more than a whisper in his consciousness. His ability to amplify that whisper is limited by the efficacy of his defensive organization. But if he allows others to shout and gesticulate until he takes notice, and then he pays attention to them, he is open to the disturbing possibility that something is going on beyond his ken. He is increasingly open about his commitment to experience and honor the perceptions of others, and the meaning they might hold for him.

How do we offer our clients organized like Evan a way to diffuse the yolk at the center into other layers of their body. It is not strictly a technical question. At its root it is a question of the philosophy and aim of the therapy. The development of ideas of the intersubjectivity of the therapeutic process (Stolorow, Brandchaft, & Atwood, 1987), and suggestions from feminist theoreticians (Wright, 1995), indicate that beyond the technical here are questions about the structure and value-belief matrix in the therapy, questions whose answers must also affect the way bioenergetic therapy is conducted. These approaches to psychoanalytic psychotherapy emphasize the centrality of each person's organization and the formulation of her or his personality and reality. If the therapist can hold to it, this view has a profoundly democratizing effect on the therapy. To hold to it successfully requires the therapist to enter the experiential venue with the client, not as someone without expertise, but rather as an experienced therapist once put in referring to a therapy group she conducted, as the "most experienced patient in the group."

Really to know the other person's experience, rather than the therapist's formulation of it, no matter how sensitively arrived at, requires that the therapist be receptive to the information presented by the client. The therapist has to soften her or his body and character organization to do that. It is often an awkward, threatening process for the therapist. One of the great fallacies about bioenergetic work is that its task is to somehow enter the client's body and route out all the unwanted detritus of one's life, leaving one feeling clear, clean and refreshed. This view has all the humanity of drain cleaning. Nevertheless, for many years I found myself feeling the presence over my shoulder of a great arbiter of what constitutes correct bioenergetic work as I worked with clients. Invariably, I would come up short and feel the same drop in my stomach and the same helpless anxiety I feel when I try to confront my father's superior, overbearing, contemptuous assertions about his knowledge of the true reality.

Well, maybe it is all my transference projections, but I know many bioenergetic therapists who have the same experience. They do not all have my father. But they do all have a father. Is there something intrinsic to the nature of fathering in our environment that leads to such powerful self-critical, self-denigrating attitudes and their compensatory narcissistic defenses of grandiosity, omniscience, and contempt for others? Using Evan's situation as an example, the answer is likely to be yes. A fathering like Evan's, which is imbued with competitive, superior attitudes, is most common. It is what I think Freud saw which caused him to arrive at the formulation about the resolution of oedipal conflict. And, indeed, the resolution of that conflict through identification with the intimidating, threatening father is an initiation into the society. The society we live in is founded and rests upon the same set of values inherent in this kind of father-son relationship.

Evan is horrified by the extent of his identification with his father. He hears the critical harsh tones of his father's voice in his voice. He feels the suppressed competitiveness in him that reflects his father's vicious striving to dominate all around him. But when he is confronted with the embodiment of his father, this time in a teacher who asserts his right to treat students harshly and with derision, he submits willingly, thinking that this man has

great knowledge or skill, or something that entitles him to behave as he does. Evan's muscles stay locked, his outrage silenced, his sensorium dulled by a merging with the authority. A merging based, at least partly, on a deep hungry longing for a man who will father him, a generative loving fathering which puts Evan ahead of the narcissistic drive to supremacy of the father.

A bioenergetic therapist I know defends the suppression of new ideas and visions of the way bioenergetic therapy might work by saying that to embrace those new ideas is to dilute bioenergetics and to leave it indistinguishable from other approaches. This argument always "took me out," to use Evan's language, meaning that I could not mount an effective argument against it and felt tongue-tied and defeated. My wife (who is also my colleague) pointed out to me how this way of presenting a position is a reflection of the same dynamics I am discussing here. The need to make oneself distinct and better is Evans father (and, of course, Evan) talking. It has left Evan well-organized and alone, unable to surrender to his love or need, unable to recognize his small place in the scheme of things, a scheme we can barely glimpse, if there is even one to see. A similar thrust in bioenergetics has left some of us looking over our shoulders, worrying that Dad is watching and clucking his tongue. Instead of feeling supported and appreciated we hide a place of fear and criticism deep inside which can vitiate our best work.

Although I do not experience this intrusive critical presence nearly as much as I used to, an incident occurred recently which brought it all back again full-force. A new client entered the psychotherapy group I lead. After five sessions during an extremely trying time for the group he decided to leave. Although at first he presented his reasons for leaving as a lack of match between himself and the group, and a dislike for my leadership style, it also slipped out near the end of his leave-taking that he was critical of the work, or lack of serious work, that other members were engaged in. In parting one of the things he said was that he wanted to be in a group that was run along bioenergetic principles. I thought I did run my group that way, but that is one place I still feel the oppressive judgment concerning the adequacy and frequency of active work.

The comments of the departing member went right inside me. In grappling with the tremendous guilt evoked in me, I came to understand a bit about the guilt he felt. He had an extremely brutal father, and acknowledged before leaving grave difficulties with authority figures, which he chose, perhaps wisely, not to work on with me. His anger and criticism of me represented, I believe, both his anger at his father and his guilt. He feels not OK in his father's eyes, and the guilt over that is devastating. My guilt is both a response to his projective identification, to which I make myself receptive and my guilt because I am seen as not OK. This is one of the more deleterious effects of the patriarchal system as we know it. It is based on the premise of making some people not OK, and controlling them through the set of judgments associated with that attitude.

The presence of critical, competitive father is an issue in Evans life and in mine. But it is also a cultural reality. So much of the world in which he and I live is infused with attitudes and emotions derived from relationships and bonds between sons and their destructive fathers. Boys start off in a contracted state, holding themselves against the devastating effects of continuous humiliation engendered by their weakness or need--their 'wimpyness'. They are expected to be deferent and submissive to the authorities who treat them that way, on pain of severe emotional and possibly physical punishment if they do not. At the very same time they are to take no guff from anyone, to show no fear in the face of intimidation from those outside the sphere of the patriarchally sanctioned authority. This is a maddening bind which leaves boys, and later men, spinning wildly, at least internally, between, adoring worshipful identification and submission on the one hand, and ferocious, often vicious, defiance of others on the other.

In this state, men have to be right. We don't ask for directions not because we are too stupid to know we are lost, but because we cannot bear the humiliation of the position of not knowing. The power of knowing assertion is tremendously forceful. When it is accompanied with the defensive need to be on top for fear of being reduced to a nobody it becomes irresistible. The gradient from uncertainty to certainty is such that certainty overflows and stabilizes uncertainty. But when the certainty is based on defensive considerations ("It will be alright", when it plainly won't be), certainty is a disaster. I have seen this at work in my relationship with my wife, one of the most competent people I know. She is, initially at least, swept away by my anxiety driven narcissistic assertions of knowing. It inhibits communication, consultation, and cooperation. The only way for a man to protect himself from domination is, at the very least, to harden his exterior, to become impermeable to external influence and to the promptings of internal states. Thus we have Evan then as a child, struggling to fight off his father's attempts to cow and subordinate him, and we have Evan now struggling to resist his inner yearning to surrender to himself.

Implicit in somatic work in psychotherapy, is the offer of listening and becoming receptive to one's deep, if barely felt body sensations. Amplifying those brings knowledge of one's vulnerability and frailness. The softening of one's body in order to become receptive is requisite for both client and therapist. That is hard to do. It is hard in dyadic relationships, it is hard in groups, and is hard in institutions especially those which assert a knowledge of a true and only way to understand or do things. This is a problem which has afflicted the field of psychotherapy also, and in bioenergetics, as well, despite the inherent contradiction with this very basic principle of responsivity to one's somatic process.

Psychotherapy is a revolutionary activity. It asserts, more now than ever, that meaning resides in the individual and her or his experience of reality. The fathering that helps in that is that of the father who recognizes that he is mortal, and limited in his ability to know and do all. This view of psychotherapy is inimical to one in which the true way is seen to reside in the body of one person and her or his followers. The truth that resides in the body is that when people know their somatic, psychic, and emotional experience, and control the expression of those parts of themselves, they become increasingly free. Evan is an example of the terribly painful conflict that results when a man yearns to be free but is ensnared in a web of love, longing, hate, and intimidation, with a father with whom he is profoundly identified. It is a father's duty to encourage and support and nurture the separation of a son and his emergence as an autonomous person. It is no less the duty of a therapist, a supervisor, or a leader.

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Biography

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The Official Publication of
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