

Transformation in Body Psychotherapy

Conscious States and the Future

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ABSTRACT

The article presents a reflection on transformation as the goal of overcoming inner crises, and the ultimate goal of a psychotherapy process. The key concepts of a body psychotherapy therapeutic path are presented in light of the different personal planes – physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual – that are involved and transformed. Finally, the two key themes of a modern psychotherapeutic pathway are explained: evolution and integration.

Keywords: Body Psychotherapy, crisis, evolutionary path, unity, transformation

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The word *transformation* is very important on the path of personal evolution and growth, so important in fact that it is consistently repeated in psychological, psychosomatic, and spiritual manuals. Everyone expects their inner journey to lead to a positive transformation. Crises would probably be less bearable if they did not give us hope for change, for an improvement of the previous imbalance. It is no accident that the Chinese ideogram for the word *crisis* also contains the symbol for opportunity because every crisis brings change. However, things could also be worse; who can say, for example, whether the current Ukraine crisis that led to war will resolve into a better arrangement? Every crisis unfortunately breeds fear of possible catastrophe.

But here, we will not speak of war but of inner evolution because the growth of the individual, from the physical to the psychological, to the emotional and spiritual, has steps which challenge the previous state, and move us on to a subsequent transformation. If there were no crisis, it would be difficult to access a higher level of consciousness. There is no possibility of survival if we do not follow the flow of life and station ourselves in crisis. What is expected from a path of psychotherapy and personal growth is to be accompanied in overcoming a crises in order to emerge transformed.

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Let's take a more detailed look at how these steps work at the various levels of our being.

The Physical Plane

First of all, the physical plane. Physical development happens in steps; the child grows, evolves, acquires new functions, and the whole setup, including mental, follows an evolutionary thread marked by a crises between each developmental transition. One struggles to separate from the mother's breast, to stand up, to become autonomous, to deal with relating with a social other, to take more and more responsibility in life, and so on. Aging and the related psychophysical decline also mark an evolution toward less material and more reflective planes in preparation for detachment. If the crisis in a transition between stages is not overcome, there may be potential physical symptoms that often have no organic explanation, for example, fear that looks like semi-epilepsies, defensive anesthesia reminiscent of Breuer's and Freud's hysterics, or, childhood fibromyalgia, fainting spells, vasovagal syndromes, all often attributable to failure to mentalize separation anxiety and states of paralysis. These are all functional physical disorders – states of chronic and persistent tension that could be generically interpreted as anxiety attacks. But in fact, Reich, in his character-analytic vegetotherapy, already explained them as an altered functioning of the neurovegetative system resulting from emotional blockages. Currently, this principle has been taken up by Porges' Polyvagal Theory, which explains the evolution of the nervous system in mammals, giving us a basis for attachment diversified through neuroception. This neuroscientific base constitutes, a century later, scientific proof of Reich's studies of the autonomic nervous system. His vegetotherapy, by which many current body-psyche practices are inspired, integrate the function of the nervous system with psychological clinical theory and practice.

Emotions

Every stage of physical development is accompanied by feelings and emotions. Emotions also have a developmental process. A child's emotions are impetuous and coarse, but as we grow, we learn to avoid being unconscious prey to our emotions. If we get stuck in a series of emotions that are dysfunctional to the moment, such as fear, anger, or

sadness, we risk halting our own evolution and allowing a psychological disorder to emerge. For example, it is functional to react to bereavement or to a major separation with a drop in energy and subsequent sinking into sadness. If, however, this drop, which expresses a crisis in the system, does not move us toward a new equilibrium, our sadness becomes stagnant and we develop a depression which may remain for life. This is Freud's concept of fixations at certain developmental stages.

The Path of Consciousness

Finally, the path of consciousness – inner evolution that is not only psychic, but also invites deep awareness. The ancient philosophical and spiritual traditions tell us that the spiritual path of knowledge of the subtler plane, and of inner and collective consciousness, is evolutionary. It proceeds step by step, marked by crises that are overcome by landing at a higher level of consciousness. Consider the various Jnanas of the Buddhist tradition, according to which the planes of consciousness follow an evolutionary process; there is no immutability even in the immaterial planes.

Thinking about the process of personal growth from an evolutionary perspective constitutes the great conceptual shift in humanistic psychology, body psychotherapy, transpersonal psychotherapy, and holistic psychosomatics. This concept restores hope and points the way forward. Come to think of it, how would we feel if, after talking to a psychotherapist about our discomfort, we were told that this discomfort could be resolved so that one could return to the previous problems that led us to the crisis and suffering. This would reflect Freud's thought that healing from neurosis returned us to the unhappiness of ordinary life.

We now know that it is possible to evolve toward living life as never before experienced. However, to accomplish this, we must introduce a second concept, in addition to the evolutionary one: the oneness of our being that functions systemically as a great network of connected subsystems. So, if we take a path of personal growth through Reichian analysis and vegetotherapy, we activate a process that touches all our planes; the physical transforms, the balance of neurotransmitters transforms, emotions transform, our awareness transforms, and finally, our plane of consciousness evolves. We are an inescapable systemic unity in constant motion.

And this unity gravitates around a self-conscious center and constitutes the central, energetic, systemic core – what Reich called the nucleus or core – and spiritual traditions refer to as the animist or psychic center, from the Greek psyche, meaning soul. And so, we are connected to the concept of the Self, which, in modern terms, can be represented as a unified consciousness of self in relation to all planes of existence. The Self, on one hand, governs the expression of the different physiological and neuropsychic instinctive, emotional, and mental functions – one’s microcosm – and on the other hand is related to the universal and spiritual planes, to the *meaning* of our existence.

Thus, the realization of health in a comprehensive sense requires a psycho-body approach capable of integrating and healing:

- The bodily self and the physical dimension
- The emotional self and the affective dimension
- The cognitive self and the psychological dimension
- The core or sense of global identity
- The transpersonal dimension

However, if we do not want to get into a generic new age type of holism, which would be gross and undifferentiated, we must study the laws and steps that govern our unitary system. In practice, this means that we need to connect the knowledge of evolutionary psychology with the needs and growth of the physical plane, with the regulation of the nervous system and related neurotransmitters, and with the steps of awareness taught by meditative practices. It is a daunting task. Each of us studies only our own field, so we are surprised when research makes a transition and connects different planes – builds bridges. We are surprised when Damasio discovers that the child’s primary self is innately bodily, when Panksepp discovers the sense of survival is linked to a few basic emotions, when Candice Pert shows that emotions are not only psychic, but also have a material basis, or when Buddhist meditation anchors us to the body.

The neuroscience research of recent decades has gone in this direction, as well as medicine’s investigations into PNEI and brain function, and discov-

eries in quantum mechanics that open up avenues to scientifically explain what we have previously known only through experience or intuition. After all, some of the greats of the last century, such as Reich or Jung, have already built these bridges. Jung stated in 1931 that “neurosis is simply the body taking over, regardless of what consciousness wants.”

We can then say that consciousness is the intelligence of the system, and the fundamental work is on integrating the body emotions. How does one work on this? Four steps are identified:

1. **To feel the emotions** – even when this seems natural, to become fully aware of them.
2. **To express the emotions** – because if they are not released, they remain imprisoned in our body memory. For these first two steps, Reichian analysis employs a series of highly and deeply structured body activations. However, these first two stages are not enough, because the expression of emotions can become crystallized.
3. **To manage the emotions** – that is, being with the emotions, breathing into them without chasing them away.
4. **To transform the emotions** – and with this comes the importance of meditation. It involves experiencing a condition of inclusive presence, the gaze that observes one’s mental and emotional states without being controlled by them. Thus, we come to the Witness, the silent gaze in which we finally really exist.

The work of a Reichian analyst, who is integrative and systemic, opens the meshes of our personality and brings us into the experience of really being here and now – that is, finally feeling contact with the deep Self. The real transformation then takes place in the silence of our heart. This is the appropriate psychology of the future; we do not focus on only one aspect, but on a global pattern that makes possible a transformation of the state of consciousness with a true transformation of crises. Personal growth then becomes an ethical duty for every individual; it is a matter of moving toward the unity of Being that also becomes the unity of earth consciousness.





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She works as a body-psychotherapist with individual and groups in Rome, in private practice and with public institutions. In particular, she works with groups for the development of human potential, emotional release, and integral awareness. She has been practicing meditation for 20 years and her work integrates body psychotherapy, emotional release and meditation to develop a deep awareness of self and others. She teaches body-psychotherapy in numerous Italian post-graduate schools of psychotherapy.

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