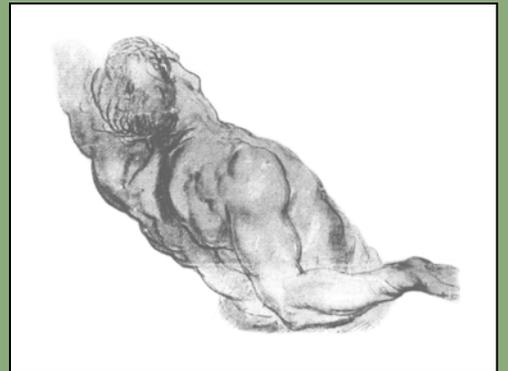


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USABP Mission Statement

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.



# Pulsation: The Growing Edge of Emotional Connection

Jim Elniski, LCSW, CBT

## Abstract

Drawing from experiences as a bioenergetic therapist and practicing artist, the author identifies pulsation as the energetic basis of emotional connection. He explores Alexander Lowen's contribution to the clinical understanding of the importance of being deeply connected with our bodily selves and our energetic connection to the world around us. He goes on to describe how he applied the pulsation principle in his work as a community-based artist with a community of developmentally disabled adults.

## Keywords

Pulsation - Emotional Connection - Community-Based Art – Bioenergetics

As a fourth generation bioenergetic therapist and client, the journey of self-discovery has led me to experiencing the vitality of pulsatory movement of being alive and of being connected to the world around me. Over the years I have become increasingly aware that my development as a therapist, an artist, and as a man, has been formed along the growing edge of the energetic movement which Alexander Lowen identified.

Bioenergetics identifies emotional connection as a process of the biologic self (Lowen 1958, 1975, 1977). Remember a time when you have been in the presence of someone in the throes of a full-bodied laugh and almost out of control. It builds and presses in on you and, if open to it, you too begin to laugh. You are overcome as much by the energetic movement of the moment of the one who is laughing as you are by the humor. And have you ever noticed how close the qualities of a good laugh is to a good cry? In bioenergetics, the energetic foundation of a good laugh; a good cry; and the rhythmic movement of a heartbeat and breathing is pulsation, a movement that extends out and into the environment as well as its counter movement back toward its moving center. Pulsatory movement is integral to both the spontaneous vitality and self-expression of an individual and to the possibility of making contact.

Lowen has been an exemplar for me in living in the question of what it means to be embodied. It is through the living experience of deeply connecting with our bodily selves and our energetic connections to the world around us where we can begin to feel the animation of our being.

To approach life energetically gives me, and those I work with, the possibility to experience an embodied life. In my clinical practice, I have also found that the client's experience of that pulsation, of a taste of one's spontaneous vitality, can contribute to a client's motivation to ask the question, "Why am I living my life the way I am?"

I had been working with Bill, who was 50 years old, for over five years, both individually and in a bi-weekly bioenergetic group for priests. Bill was deeply conflicted and confused about being a priest and at the same time being a sexually active gay man. One theme that was ever-present was the conflict between his heart-felt regard for his parishioners, his deeply abiding faith in God, and his sexual and relational desires and needs.

After a lengthy working through of his version of "the hope of the 'yet to be' and the dread of the 'not me'" (Mitchell, 1993), he made a final decision to leave the priesthood. With his permission in hand, I would like to share with you what he wrote about a recent session. The session described includes a technique/ procedure that was originally developed by Denis Royer, an International Institute Bioenergetic Trainer from Quebec, Canada who has developed ways to work with the religious bioenergetically. In Bill's words:

*Last week I was given the gift of tears -twice no less! In late December I attended the bi-weekly session of my bioenergetic therapy group with fellow priests. I spoke of my transition and my therapist, Jim, asked me if I remembered a song from my early years of being a priest. Of course, the first song that came to mind was the song I used for my Ordination and First Mass announcements: All I Ask of You is Forever to Remember Me as Loving You. I sang the refrain and hummed the melody of the verses. Then Jim put me over the breathing stool, the infamous 'stretcher,' to open up my rib cage. I sang the song again and reached forward and within moments the sobs began to escape, painful moans from deep, deep within. As I reached out over my head I said good-bye, good-bye to the thousands who had been a part of my life in my many priestly, pastoral assignments. That farewell also included my sadness for friends lost. The acceptance and expression of my sadness was cathartic and an important part of letting go. Twelve years of formation, one year as a deacon, twenty-three years a priest. Thirty-six years of an identity changing. That's not counting the childhood years moving in the direction of priesthood. And somehow my body knew it had to let go of these years, these people, before beginning a new journey. I couldn't carry this sadness locked inside forever...*

What I sensed during the session and was confirmed by what he wrote was the beginning of an emergence of that deeply held back pulsation; that is what "his body somehow knew."

As Lowen made clear in his writing (Lowen, 19 ), an important function of the pulsatory movement is to make contact. Stanley Keleman, an early member and trainer in Lowen's Institute for Bioenergetic Analysis, further developed the somatic-emotional dimensions of pulsation (Keleman 1975, 1987). In Bill's case, the softening of his somatic and characterological holding, and experiencing the pulsation of his sadness within the relational support of his therapist and his bioenergetic priest group brought him to a new level of receptivity with regard to those around him. He was surprised at the positive supportive responses he was receiving from family and friends after announcing in his Christmas card that he was leaving the priesthood.

*I realized that I was truly loved by all these people, not for being 'Father Bill' but for being 'just Bill.' The personal gifts that I brought to ministry was the glue connecting me to people's lives. It wasn't the title. In many, many therapy sessions, I kept returning to the core fear of my life and the question: 'Who really loves me?' For within this question lies the fear that I am utterly, utterly alone! That no one really loves me. That I don't really matter to someone... So this day, I realized how loved I am, by so many wonderful people, and I was given the gift of tears. And I thanked God for being at a place in my life where I can feel, feel the feelings, feel the tears, and open up my body and be in touch with the deepest reaches of my core."*

To regard life energetically gives me and my clients the possibility to experience the rich texture of being alive and an enrichment of the meaning of life; literally giving body to thought.

I would like to share with you an example of how Lowen's work has found its way outside my office in my practice professional practice. Last summer I was invited to facilitate a collaborative art project with a number of Chicago organizations that supply social services for developmentally disabled adults. Each of these organizations provides space in which these individuals can work as artists. Typically, they come in and are hard at work on their individual projects with little interaction between them. What I designed is an example of how Lowen's focus on the living body has been applied in an alternative venue. In this community-based project, participants were led through a series of bioenergetic breathing, grounding, and stretching exercises that sensitized them to internal body rhythms through movement and sound. Each of them then individually painted and collaged on flexible wood slats the graphic pattern they had created in response to one of the internal rhythms with which they had become aware, e.g. breath, heartbeat, and in a couple of instances, a chronic tic. They then collaboratively wove together their individual slats into an eight foot tornado-shaped frame. This work was both a growing edge of their connection to each other and the creation of a space to metaphorically hold and support their vitalness. The growing edge of the pulsatory movement is inventive. There is an interesting parallel between our conception of pulsation and the growing edge described by chaos theory (Gleick, 1987). In chaos theory the growing edge is identified as that area or region between the "chaotic" where there is no coherent, established pattern; and "the ordered" where the system repeats a very limited number of patterns. The collective weaving of their individual slats was both in response to pulsation as a biologic reality (the ongoing expansion and contraction of internal body rhythms) and as a powerful metaphor of life's striving for connectedness (the tornado as a centripetal force of nature).

I was first introduced to a clinical understanding of the concept of pulsation through the writings of Al Lowen and Stanley Keleman. Now, into my 50's, through my years of bioenergetic therapy and training with therapists and theorists trained and influenced by Lowen, I believe that my deepest experiences of being alive and connected with those I care for and work with, are those times, those moments, when I feel, in Lowen's words, "the life of the body."

Acknowledgement: This paper is a version of a keynote address I had the privilege of presenting at the 2003 Southern California Bioenergetic Conference: *The Body Self in Relationship*. It also reflects the invaluable support I have received from Philip Helfaer, whose counsel and writings have brought alive for me the work of Alexander Lowen.

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#### Biography

**Jim Elniski**, LCSW, CBT lives and works in Chicago where he has a private bioenergetic therapy practice. He has been on the Board of Trustees of the International Institute for Bioenergetic Analysis, is a local trainer and former director of the Chicago Society for Bioenergetic Analysis. Jim is also a practicing artist and Associate Professor and Director of the First Year Program at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

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Jacqueline A. Carleton, Ph.D., Editor (jacarletonphd@gmail.com)

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Jacqueline A. Carleton, Ph.D.

Editor

USA Body Psychotherapy Journal

115 East 92<sup>nd</sup> Street #2A

New York, NY 10128

212.987.4969

[jacarletonphd@gmail.com](mailto:jacarletonphd@gmail.com)