

Sensory Awareness and Our Attitude Toward Life

Charlotte Selver

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This text is an excerpt from the introduction to A Taste of Sensory Awareness. It was written in collaboration with Gordon Bennett and first published by the SAF in 1989.

Abstract

In this excerpt Selver presents the attitude of the work of Sensory Awareness and the responsibility of becoming aware and more fully living our lives through simple, daily activities. She clarifies how Sensory Awareness, even though often having therapeutic effects, is not meant to be therapy.

Keywords

Sensory Awareness – Awareness – Experimenting - Discovery

In our work of Sensory Awareness, we experiment with all the simple activities of daily life, all the things which we have been doing since we were born, or which we have learned in our earliest infancy, such as walking, standing, sitting, lying, moving, resting, seeing, speaking, listening, etc. As Elsa Gindler said, “*Life is the Playground for our work.*”

Our daily life gives us opportunity enough for discovery: in combing our hair, washing the dishes, in speaking to somebody, and so on. In such “unimportant” areas of life we can experience the same attitudes we have in “important” areas, where we are often too absorbed to feel clearly what is happening.

Although practicing Sensory Awareness often has therapeutic effects, it would be a misunderstanding to think of our work as therapy. Our purpose is not to make living healthier, but to make it more conscious; not to make it happier, but to let it come more into accord with our original nature. The more we arrive at our original nature, the more we discover that healthier and happier living and relating *comes about by itself*.

We begin to discover that experiences within the organism are parallel to experiences in life. This can be difficult. Often we may find ourselves full of fear, not wanting to allow changes. Through experimenting, we may come face-to-face with the reasons for previously unexplained problems in our lives. But with growing ability to permit what becomes necessary, our elasticity grows, and so does our security.

We cannot know how much energy we have as long as we keep interfering with our own activities. We cannot know our real abilities until we have freed ourselves to such an extent that they can unfold more fully. As Elsa Gindler used to say, “*If we would have the strength at our disposal that we use in hindering ourselves, we would be as strong as lions.*”

What creates our freedom, or our lack of freedom, is our *attitude* toward whatever we meet: the way we are living our daily lives; the way we are with our families and friends; the way we do our work; the way we read the newspaper; in short, the way we are in this world. When it is understood that we are including the broader questions of our *attitude-toward-life*, this will help us much more than just working on what we call “the body”.

So, in the very simple experiments of a Sensory Awareness session, we can make some small steps to come to ourselves and to awaken some of the possibilities which are dormant inside us. For instance, we may work to become so quiet that life can begin to whisper to us again, so that we are not just seeing the big, blunt things, but can be touched and nurtured by the beauty of what may be small and quiet.

But not only beauty becomes conscious: there is also an opening of our heart to those difficulties in life which demand our presence and maybe our help. Too often, we don't see and we don't feel what is happening around us. Too often, we are only interested in ourselves, our family and maybe our very close friends. To become sensitive enough and free enough to become active as a member of our community, country, and world - this is also part of awakening.

For me, Elsa Gindler was a great example of this through her deep involvement in what was happening in the world. During the Hitler time, although she was invited to live in Switzerland, where she could have been secure, she stayed in Berlin giving help to whoever needed it. Her life was in danger from resisting Hitler, and from the constant bombings, but she did not leave.

This attitude of responsibility is part of becoming aware, so that we would not be part of the “*Me* generation”, but rather of the “*We* generation”, embracing everyone and everything on this planet. Do you not feel that everyone has an equal right to live a life, unconditioned, free from pressure and rejection, free from starvation and harassment?

Becoming more and more able to be there in situations, whether easy or difficult; to be more there with our mind, with our hearts, with our sensitivities, with our strengths - this is very, very important.

An Interview with Charlotte Selver and Charles Brooks

By Ilana Rubenfeld

Abstract

Ilana Rubenfeld comments on the simplicity and profundity of the teaching of Charlotte Selver, excerpting an interview with Charlotte Selver and Charles V. W. Brooks that took place in September 1976, in New York City, in which the development of "Sensory Awareness" was discussed. The author states that the emphasis of Selver's work on awareness and presence influenced both the creation of the Rubenfeld Synergy Method® and the field of body psychotherapy.

Keywords

Support – Elsa Gindler – Erich Fromm – Fritz Perls – Reich – Eva Reich – Rubenfeld Synergy Method

It was a hot, steamy New York City day in the mid 1960's. I was rushing up the street, weaving between hordes of people. Finally, I reached Charlotte's building, rode the elevator and walked through a very familiar door. I entered, looked around and recognized many colleagues already lying on their backs on her famous wooden floor. This was always the beginning (as the first four notes of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony): Charlotte Selver sitting in the front, facing us. There was a hush in the room.

"Let the floor support you, allow your body to rest on the floor," she said, followed by a long pause of silence. "Which parts of you are in contact with the floor and which parts are not in contact with the floor?" A very long pause of silence followed as we all continued to lie on the floor. "Do you feel any difference?" she asked. The hush was broken! "Charlotte, why do we lie on the floor for such a long time?" a young man asked. And with a wonderful Viennese accent, she replied, smiling, "Because sooner or later, something will change and it won't be the floor!"

Well, there you have it! Sounds simple and yet so profound! Charlotte was a master at teaching us to experience the obvious. *Awareness* was (and is) the key to any change. It was many years later that I began to understand and experience what she meant. The above scene was repeated in many variations, and I can remember them vividly.

In 1977, Thomas Hanna asked me to be a contributing editor of the *Somatics Journal*. He asked me what I wanted to write as my first assignment and my reply was clear! "I want to interview Charlotte Selver and Charles Brooks!" I told him. He was quite pleased at this plan and gave me the green light. Since we all lived in New York, I was able to arrange this meeting with ease. The following are some highlights of this historic interview. (It was published in its entirety in the Spring 1977 issue of *Somatics*.)

CHARLOTTE SELVER AND CHARLES V.W. BROOKS: An Interview by Ilana Rubenfeld

The following interview took place in September 1976, in New York City, at the apartment of Dora Dubsky, teacher of music.

Rubenfeld: I was so surprised to come here and find the name of my former music teachers on the door!

Selver: You studied music?

Rubenfeld: Yes. I graduated from the Juilliard School of Music as a conductor, and it was music that led me to body/mind work. How did it begin for you?

Selver (smiling): I was also a musician. My greatest interest as a young girl was music. I wanted to become a pianist. It is perhaps good that I did not follow it up. With my increasing deafness, I would not have been able to hear my music nor anybody else's. At that time, I went to the first international youth meeting after the war (WWI). One of the people who made a great impression on me was a woman who picked up children from the street...children who had lost their parents...and made the first experimental school with them. She gave an hour of gymnastics, and it was there that she looked over at me and she said, "You must have something to do with movement. Do you know Elsa Gindler?" I didn't. I had never heard of her. She said, "She has done wonders for me. When you go to Berlin, be sure that you visit her." When I was in Berlin, I suddenly remembered, looked into the telephone book, found her address, and went one day into her studio. In this first hour she didn't seem to see me. I was sitting in the background while she was working. In that hour I had the feeling that whatever I had learned was nothing compared to what I felt she offered. Her approach was entirely different. She didn't teach anything!

Rubenfeld (laughing): To teach nothing is to teach everything!

Selver: I remember that first session. The people were working on jumping, and jumping was something that was always the most horrible thing for me. Gindler said, "Do you feel the air through which you jump?" And the people continued to jump.

Gindler said, "How would it help little Mary when the teacher tells her, 'Look at Elsie! How beautiful she jumps. Do it the same way!' How does it help her? She has to find out for herself." Such remarks, feeling the ground, feeling the space, feeling the air and so on, which she interjected while people were experimenting on jumping, were for me entirely new. And it took me so that I decided I wanted to work with her. I felt I had to start all over again. She rejected me three times! So the last time I came to her, she explained why it would be so difficult for me. "You have to unlearn everything which you have learned" she said, "and that's the most difficult thing in the world. I'd rather not take the responsibility. But if you insist, I will accept you." After I had worked with her for over a year, one day she came to me, put her hand on my shoulder and said, "At last, the first movement!" It took me a very long time to lose this shellac...very long. So that's how I came to it.

Rubinfeld: That was certainly a very important moment. She met you and understood the great difficulties you would have from your previous training and habit patterns.

Selver: Yes, she knew and she waited. During those first years that I was with her, she continued with her own experimentation that extended into our sessions. In fact, she never stopped her research. As I see it now, this was the beginning of the basis of her way of working: *exploration*. And out of that, gradually, her work evolved. So breathing was not something to be taught, but to be experienced and permitted to be self-directive. We found out how, when one does not interfere, breathing asserts itself in the most natural way. And this went on with everything: work on motion, on balance, on speaking, on the way one approaches others, each task, and so on.

Rubinfeld: When did you come to the United States, Charlotte?

Selver: At the end of 1938.

Rubinfeld: In the beginning, here in New York, what kind of response did you find to your work? What kind of people came to you?

Selver: I had a lot of luck. That was most important! And fortunately, people liked me. My great chance came when I met Erich Fromm, and he began to work with me and was very fascinated. He mentioned it to the psychiatrists in the William Allison White Association. And I got a lot of students.

Rubinfeld: Speaking of therapists, what happened with you and Fritz Perls?

Selver: Fromm told Perls to see me. He worked for one and a half years. He wanted me to work with each one of his patients, just before he would take over. He was very touched by the work, and he used some of it in his own work.

Rubinfeld: I remember Fritz saying many times, "Lose your head and come to your senses!"

Selver: You know this whole thing that is so strong in his books: you *have* no body, you *have* no organism, you *are* the organism! I think this is the most important thing in our work that he used.

Rubinfeld: Those concepts showed up strongly in his work. You certainly influenced him. Charlotte, when did you meet Charles? And how did you two come to collaborate?

Brooks: It was quite a while ago. It was February, 1958, that's almost 19 years ago. I went to her class and was hooked immediately. Gradually, I slipped out of the cabinet work I was doing, and into living and studying with Charlotte full time.

Rubinfeld: Quite a dynamic mixture of energies!

Brooks: Yes, a very fascinating and unique situation. In 1963, I taught my first class. That was 14 years ago. I feel it's only the last couple of years that I have really begun to feel my way into it.

Rubinfeld: How do you feel about the process taking this amount of time?

Brooks: I was very deeply conditioned. But when I came to Charlotte's work, I found that it was really so different than the Reichians and also my bioenergetic friends. They were therapists using methods, and it was one person healing another person, essentially symptoms, through methods and techniques that had become, sort of orthodox.

Selver: Reich was very strongly influenced by Elsa Gindler. His first wife was a teacher of our work, and his emphasis on breathing stems from that time.

Rubinfeld: That's a very interesting connection. I don't know how many people know about that.

Brooks: We met Eva Reich at the Association for Humanistic Psychology Conference in Princeton just a few days ago. And I was discussing this with her. She apparently knew it already. I can say, "I am an organism." That's a beautiful, intellectual, philosophical statement. But what do I mean by it? This is something that I would say can only be *experienced*, which makes it mystical.

Selver: What Charles calls mystical - the experiences which one has, in breathing, in balance, in contact with another person - this can be very clearly experienced and yet be experienced as a wonder too. Revelations can come from the very smallest experience. For instance, eating. By the way, I forgot to mention Alan Watts, who had at least as much influence on my way of going about the work as Fromm had. When I visited Watts, I felt we were very akin. And when he worked with me, he exclaimed, "But this is the living Zen!"

Rubinfeld: Living Zen! That is beautiful!

Selver: From that encounter, we had a lot of seminars together and he brought me into contact with many people in California.

Rubinfeld: All these connections and interfaces!

Selver: You know, first Elsa Gindler and Heinrich Jacoby, then Erich Fromm, who spoke to Fritz Perls, and then Alan Watts and meeting Richard Baker who interested Suzuki Roshi in our work.

Rubinfeld: Did you ever have the occasion to speak to or meet Moshe Feldenkrais?

Selver: No, I have not had the occasion to meet him personally.

Rubinfeld: Well, I hope that I can arrange such a meeting...would you enjoy that?

Selver: If I can hear him.

Rubinfeld: OK. (*Everyone laughs*) Feldekrais also mentions Jacoby. Moshe told me that he met and studied with Jacoby in Europe in the late 1940's, and that he was very influenced by him. There is a great parallel between the self-healing of Elsa Gindler and Moshe Feldenkrais. While working in Judo, Moshe injured his knee. The doctors examined him and could not alter his condition without an operation. So he began to search for ways to heal his own knee. It's fascinating, how people have gotten into this kind of work because of their own personal life and tragedy.

Selver: Elsa Gindler told me that her doctor suggested that she go to a sanatorium, and had predicted that she would die during that time (T.B.). He later met her on the street and said, "What? You are...here? Come, I want to examine you. Were you in treatment? What did you do?" She answered, "I had this diet and I worked on breathing!" And her doctor said, "Wonders can sometimes happen!"

Rubinfeld: Yes...This happened to F.M. Alexander in connection to his voice problems. When he lost his voice, the doctors said, "Just don't talk and you'll get your voice back!"

Selver: Yes, F.M. Alexander was a great inspiration to me. I went into the public library and found one of his books.

Rubinfeld: Which book, Charlotte?

Selver: *The Use of the Self*. I was amazed that somebody coming from Australia, who had an entirely different background, had also originated something out of his own difficulty very similar to Gindler. You know his fabulous description of standing before the mirror, because he couldn't feel it, seeing what he was doing?

Rubinfeld: Lately, I've been asking very serious questions about the way people touch each other. (This is 1977. Now, in 2004, I'm still asking these questions of my students and colleagues.) I'm sad to see that touch is used to "correct" other people. In other words, they're touching with hands that already have a preconceived idea of what they want (to have happen). Would you share some ideas you have about the way that touch, the kind of touch that you see evolving, is more organic?

Selver: Everything is "getting in touch." You speak and you get in touch with somebody. You get in touch with your work, and so on. Hands are only one way to come in touch.

Brooks: Millions of people in the United States have cats and dogs and horses as a substitute, because touching another human being brings too many associations into play. So touch is to me no different from feeling one's own breathing and being one's own breathing. And it's no different from my feeling of going into a room with a fine painting, and getting so quiet that the painting can speak. Everybody goes in and sees a painting and right away their minds start to buzz. Same thing with touch...buzz, buzz, buzz.

Rubinfeld: The same with touch. People touch, and instead of touching and waiting, they already have an idea that it has to go this way or that way.

Brooks: The essential thing is the touch and wait.

Rubinfeld: Yes. Touch and wait, there's a delicate balance.

Brooks: Yes, a fine line that has to be worked at - like playing a violin.

Rubinfeld: Oh yes. When people ask me why my work looks so simple, I say it took me many years. I've been searching and experimenting for over 15 years, and I think I'm just beginning to understand (the synergy of all aspects of life) something. More people are appreciating the work (awareness and changes) coming from within, rather than the work coming from without.

Selver: The important thing is...just permit the *presence*. Actually everybody's a healer. If anyone allows a full contact, then something goes out from one to the other. Really, in giving, one receives at the same time. And in receiving, one gives at the same time.

Rubinfeld: It's like a total circle - an act of synergy.

Selver: Yes, without wanting to give something special.

Rubinfeld: That's right. It's being really *there* that is so special. Charlotte, some professionals call your work "soft." Can you share some of your thoughts about this?

Selver: I wouldn't call it "soft." In fact, there is a great deal of discipline necessary in our work. To be able to really contact somebody already requires a great deal of awakesness and quiet and fullness of connection, and to arrive at that is, in itself, already a long road.

Rubinfeld: How did you come to name your work "Sensory Awareness?"

Selver: This is one of the greatest problems. Elsa Gindler never called it anything. She said, "I'm working with human beings." She also called it at one time "Nach-Entfaltung". The literal translation is "to unfold in a later stage of one's life" which means that we already have everything. It has to be dug out and opened up. Often Gindler would work on the same activity, like balance, for three months. And it would involve *everything*.

Rubinfeld: In other words, everything! That's why Zen says if you can sit, you can do anything.

Selver: And when you speak of simple, do you know the beautiful story of the Zen student who went after 30 years to his master, slapped him in the face and said, "Why didn't you tell me right away that it is so simple?" (Everyone laughs a great deal...) So you asked about the name "Sensory Awareness". Very often "perception" means only "what I see", and it's often very much in the head. But when one says "sensory", that includes all the senses. The whole nervous system is impregnated by anything that happens, and one must be quiet enough and receptive enough so that this can happen, so that no thought and no words interfere with it. One is just being open for the experience itself. And I have not yet, I should say, found a way to make it so simple that people would lick their lips for it.

Rubinfeld (laughs): That's a good description, "lick their lips for it."

Selver: Did you know that the long-term study group has been working at least as much in the fields, in the kitchen, and in the woodshop, together with the Zen students.

Rubinfeld: That is wonderful!

Selver: And I found this was a very essential part of the work of the study group, because it led directly into daily life. I think that's one of the most important aspects of our work--the way it becomes integrated and used in everybody's life, not something separate that you do at certain hours and when you have done it, it's over. Now, you have asked a lot of very important questions, the history of the work and how we came to it. Nobody else could answer you that.

Rubenfeld: That's right, nobody! You're the only one that could really do that! For me it's exciting to hear the history of the people who influenced you and whom you influenced. What's happening today (1977) is very important. The paths - Gindler, (Perls), Jacoby, F.M. Alexander, Feldenkrais, you and Charles - are converging. This makes it a very exciting time to be living!

End of interview

While preparing this article, I re-read the 1977 interview with Charlotte Selver many times and I came to appreciate how important her work has been, and still is, in the body psychotherapy field. In the 1960's, I met Fritz Perls (co-founder of Gestalt Therapy) and I was deeply impressed by how he peppered his sessions by asking us to close our eyes and "go inside" our bodies - ourselves. After sometime, Fritz would then instruct us to open our eyes and "look outside" at the environment to see if anything had changed. He called this experiential process "shuttling". After studying with Charlotte Selver and doing the interview, I understood how much Fritz Perls had integrated her approach and thereby influenced my work.

Charlotte Selver's way of teaching "awareness", the "obvious", and "the now" influenced the creation of the Rubenfeld Synergy Method®. Indeed, I dare say that all body-psychotherapy is indebted to the life work of Charlotte Selver!

I conclude with a poem by a great Japanese artist, Hokusai (1760-1849). It embodies Charlotte's spirit!

I have been in love with painting ever since I became conscious of it at the age of six. I drew some pictures I thought fairly good when I was fifty, but nothing I did before the age of seventy was of any value at all. At seventy-three, I have at last caught every aspect of nature -- birds, fish, animals, insects, trees, grasses, all. When I am eighty I shall have developed still further, and I will really master the secrets of art at ninety. When I reach a hundred my work will be truly sublime and my final goal will be attained around the age of one hundred and ten, when every line and dot I draw will be imbued with life! -Hokusai

Biography

Ihana Rubenfeld, musician, conductor and Alexander Method teacher, studied with Fritz Perls, Moshe Feldenkrais, and Charlotte Selver. She created her own integration which she calls Rubenfeld Synergy. She has taught throughout the world and maintains an extensive training program. At the USABP Conference in Baltimore in 2002 she received recognition with the Lifetime Achievement Award. She can be reached at rubenfeld@aol.com.