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## The Primacy of Experiential Practices in Body Psychotherapy

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**Don Hanlon Johnson** is perhaps best known for writing some of the first reputable modern books about Body Psychotherapy: *Body: Recovering Our Sensual Wisdom* (1983), *The Body in Psychotherapy: Inquiries in Somatic Psychology* (edited with Ian Grand, 1998), as well as *Bone, Breath, and Gesture: Practices of Embodiment* (1995) and *Groundworks: Narratives of Embodiment* (1997). He is the founder of the first fully accredited graduate program for somatic psychology at the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS) in San Francisco, where he continues working as a professor. He received his PhD in Philosophy from Yale University, with his doctoral dissertation on relations between changes in the body and changes in consciousness, and he was one of the first long-term students of Ida Rolf, whom he supported in the founding of the Rolf Institute. As the director of the Somatic Education and Research Project at Esalen Institute, and in similar functions throughout his career, he engaged himself to facilitate dialogue among the schools of Somatic Psychology in order to promote Somatic Psychology's influence in the Western culture of healing. The following contribution is an expression of this commitment to embodiment, and its significance for human well-being. His numerous and significant publications have contributed to the founding of a historiography of Body Psychotherapy.

Body Psychotherapy (or Body-Oriented Psychology) is formed by the confluence of two currents moving in opposite directions. The more well-known current developed as a branch of the depth-analytic therapies, developed by Wilhelm Reich, who was originally inspired by Freud's early recognition of the specific bodily roots of mental disorders.<sup>21</sup> The innovators in this movement created technical practices of breathing, touch, sensory awareness, and movement that were conceptualized and taught within pre-existing psychoanalytic theory, with articulated language constructs and sometimes bewildering dictionaries of character types. Another robust current of development moved in an opposite direction—from sustained, deliberate, and reflective bodily practices toward new theory-building.

This second current, whose origins go back to the late nineteenth century, is not as widely known as the psychoanalytic community, because its originators typically developed their approaches in private institutes, informal schools, or clinics, outside of universities, and have written very little. They include: Eutony, Focusing, Sensory Awareness, Feldenkrais, Rolfing, the F. M. Alexander Technique, Continuum, Body-Mind Centering, Authentic Movement, Middendorf Breath Work, and many others. The nature and effects of these practices are not easy to articulate. They are not taught within a psychological framework, even though they have psychological implications. Nor

21 For example, Sigmund Freud, "Some Points for a Comparative Study of Organic and Hysterical Paralyzes" and "Observations of a Severe Case of Hemi-Anaesthesia in a Hysterical Male" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. I* (James Strachey, Trans.) (pp. 169ff., 30ff.). London: Hogarth Press, 1966

are they just “physical,” like physical therapy or classical Swedish massage. Because of their primarily experiential nature, they exist in a realm whose meanings are not easily captured within the dominant intellectual categories. What follows are three illustrations of this bottom-up movement: Focusing, Authentic Movement, and Body-Mind Centering.

## Focusing

Eugene Gendlin (1962, 1998), the creator of Focusing, gives a paradigmatic example of this countercurrent from Isadora Duncan’s autobiography:

For hours I would stand quite still, my two hands folded between my breasts, covering the solar plexus. My mother often became alarmed to see me remain for such long intervals quite motionless as if in a trance—but I was seeking and I finally discovered the central spring of all movements, the crater of motor power, the unity from which all diversities of movements are born . . . (Isadora Duncan, 1927, p. 75)

Gendlin comments on this text:

Isadora Duncan stands still, sometimes for a long period. She senses dance steps she could move into, but they don’t feel right. What would feel right is not sure yet. She is “seeking,” she says above, “looking for,” “waiting for” the right “feel” to come, “willing to let” it come. This seeking, waiting for, looking, and letting is a kind of action. It is a way of relating to, “interacting with” . . . What? Where? It is interaction with a right feel, a new kind of feel which “will come” in a new place.

This feel, and this new space, are both made in this very interaction.

Her new looking, waiting for, letting . . . These change what comes, but it is still not right. She responds to its changed way of feeling by being differently toward it in some way. She *points to* a facet

of the feel of what she would dance, *pursues it*. In response to the *pointing* and the *pursuing*, the feel itself becomes more distinct, like something there, a datum, an object, something in a space that wasn’t there before.

As it forms, the “feel” understands itself, so to speak. It carries its own “yes, yes . . .” with it. She is “in touch with herself” in a new way—not just a self that was there before, waiting. Rather, a new, changed, more right “feel” is there, and is the “being in touch with.” Then she dances what she could not have danced before. (Gendlin, 1998)

“Then she dances what she could not have danced before.” Here is the heart of this reverse movement in the development of new approaches to psychotherapy, whose source lies in methodically cultivated bodily experience, and language emerging from that experience. During the past century, tens, perhaps hundreds, of thousands of people in Europe and the Americas have been engaging in this family of bodily practices. They attend to their experiences of moving, breathing, being touched; they wait; new movements arise along with old memories, long forgotten, and new solutions to life problems, with new strengths to confront old wounds, loosening the bonds of an outdated sense of self. These new movements and solutions emerge not from the side of already-made psychological notions, but from an experiential realm that carries an intelligence that has not yet been formulated in language and concept. These discoveries come not from already-crafted depth-psychoanalytic theory, but from quiet systematic and communal reflections on bodily experience in specific kinds of ways, created by a very large number of Somatics innovators, often working largely in silence.

Gendlin has been a major voice of this countermovement, showing how our bodies are the carriers of meanings not yet put into concept nor word, and that attending to bodily experiences is the key to creative thought-forms that can carry us forward into new worlds of activity (Gendlin, 1962). Both his psychotherapeutic method and his considerable body of theoretical texts have at their core the

righting of a historical imbalance in which theoretical constructs are given more value than not-yet-conceived experiential processes. His theories are derived from decades of observing and documenting the results of human growth processes, paying careful and sustained attention to the bodily “felt sense” and how attention to that sense slowly emerges into new verbal, conceptual expressions. His methods are designed to help people turn their attention toward the bodily “felt sense” as the source of fresh language and concepts in response to needs that are not met by the old. As in the work of his early partner Carl Rogers, there is a freshness in his spare conceptual frameworks, redolent of characteristically American pragmatism, without a hint of psychoanalytic seasoning.

This turn toward experience, learning to wait attentively until fresh notions emerge before speaking, is characteristic of many practices. It is not easy to do this; as in the cultivation of a spiritual life, one needs methods of slowing down, paying attention, and savoring silence. Especially for the well educated, it is much easier to rush into analytical thought and vocabularies. So the vast number of highly skillful practices are also methods of allowing practitioners to gain a greater access to this nonverbal realm, and to remain in it for a longer period of time, especially in comparison to the time one usually spends in the realms of talk, thought, and entertainment.

It is in this context of methods of settling into not-yet-verbalized bodily experiences that one can understand various methods of bodily practices, and their impact on the understanding of psychotherapy and the education of psychotherapists.

### **Authentic Movement**

Focusing, as described above, typically involves two people sitting quietly, learning to pay attention to the ebbs and flows of experience, waiting for words to emerge that truly express those experiences. Authentic Movement is another widespread bodily discipline that involves a similar attitude, but in the context of movement. Its origins are in the work of Mary Starks Whitehouse (1911–1979), one of

the founders of Dance Therapy, though Janet Adler (2002) developed it in its present form and name.

The emphasis is on the long and sustained practice of quiet movement, usually in pairs or groups. One person in the pair or group adopts the role of noncritical witness, eyes open, present to what is happening, creating an atmosphere of containment, so that the mover is free to allow new, and possibly fearful, experiences to emerge in movement. The mover moves with eyes closed. At the end of a period of movement, which may last from a few minutes to an hour or more, there is a disciplined period of discourse whose aim is to allow words to emerge—in much the same way that movements emerged, not talking about the experience, but allowing words and thoughts to come from it.

This practiced discourse within a nonjudgmental atmosphere of safety is what makes Authentic Movement unique among body-movement practices and brings it into the arena of being a psychotherapy. The moving and the speaking, and sometimes writing, allow the mover to claim forgotten or rejected dimensions of the self. Mary Whitehouse writes of how she came to develop this practice, which she called “Moving in Depth”:

What I began to understand during the beginning of my work in movement in depth was that in order to release a movement that is instinctive (i.e., not the “idea” of the person doing that movement nor my idea of what I want them to do), I found that I had to go back toward not moving. In that way I found out where movement actually started. It was when I learned to see what was authentic about movement, and what was not, and when people were cheating, and when I interfered, and when they were starting to move from within themselves, and when they were compelled to move because they had an image in their heads of what they wanted to do; it was then that I learned to say “Go ahead and do your image, never mind if you are thinking of it,” and when to say “Oh, wait longer. Wait until you feel it from within.” (Whitehouse, 1999a, p. 23)

The practice involves teaching people how to wait, as Isadora Duncan did, for movement to arise and evolve as one gives oneself to it within an atmosphere of quiet attention. It is a sustained, tutored, disciplined waiting for movement—and words—to come from the self, instead of from habitual movements—or words—or moving and speaking as others would have us do, or as we think they would have us do.

A word about what this way of working with the body requires. There is necessary an attitude of inner openness, a kind of capacity for listening to one's self that I would call honesty. It is made possible only by concentration and patience. In allowing the body to move in its way, not in a way that would look nice, or that one thinks it should, in waiting patiently for the inner impulsive, in letting the reactions come up exactly as they occur on any given evening—new capacities appear, new modes of behavior are possible, and the awareness gained in the specialized situation goes over into a new sense of one's self . . . (Whitehouse, 1995, p. 250)

These teachers do not use words like “instinctive” and “natural” in the technical, academically charged senses, but in a more ordinary street-usage, used to describe commonplace experiences of the difference between posed, predictable, habitual, or stereotypical movements, and those that surprise us as being fresh and spontaneous.

Authentic Movement is movement that is natural to a particular person, not learned like ballet or calisthenics, not purposeful or intellectualized as “this is the way I should move”—to be pleasing, to be powerful, to be beautiful or graceful. Authentic Movement is an immediate expression of how the client feels at any given moment. The spontaneous urge to move or not to move is not checked, judged, criticized or weighed by the conscious mind. (Adler, 1999, p. 122)

Janet Adler uses “authenticity” in the same sense as Heidegger does in *Being and Time*, returning to the Greek roots of the word “self-positing.”

My core being is mine to be in one way or another. That core being has always made some sort of decision as to the way in which it is in each case mine . . . And because core being is in each case essentially its own possibility, it *can*, in its very Being, “choose” itself and win itself; it can also lose itself and never win itself; or only “seem” to do so. But only in so far as it is essentially something which can be *authentic*—that is, something of its own—can it have lost itself and not yet won itself. (Heidegger, 1962, p. 68)<sup>22</sup>

And:

“Inauthenticity” . . . amounts rather to a quite distinctive kind of Being-in-the-world—the kind which is completely fascinated by the “world” and by the Dasein—with of Others in the “they.” (Ibid., p. 220)

Just as we are our “own,” to dispose of within the “they” world of gossip, trivia, and opinion, so too our movements, our speaking, and our thinking are ours to give over to preconceived notions about how we should move, speak, or think; or, we can wait in silence until movements and words come from within ourselves.

When movement was simple and inevitable, not to be changed no matter how limited or partial, it became what I called “authentic”—it could be recognized as genuine, belonging to that person. (Whitehouse, 1999b, p. 81)

Adler's account (1999) transforms Wilhelm Reich's distinction between voluntary and involuntary movements. For Reich, the paradigm of the involuntary is the tremulous shaking or “streamings,” associated with orgasmic

22 I have taken the great liberty of translating “Dasein,” untranslated in the English texts, as “core being.” There are thousands of pages of argument published about the proper translation of this central concept of Heidegger's work.

release, evoked in the various exercises of bioenergetic therapies, and mirrored in other kinds of energy discharge. Whitehouse, Adler, and their associates have been exploring a much wider realm of different kinds of nondeliberate movements, opening up different realms of feeling, memory, and image. And unlike Reich, Adler extends this direction of movement into language and thought itself.<sup>23</sup> This breadth of bodily exploration, seeking primal roots of movement and words in many new areas, has made the practice more congenial to non-Reichian analysts and psychologists who feel the Reichian paradigm is too constricted. Practice is in the foreground, constantly being the norm against which words and theory are being reshaped.

### Body-Mind Centering

The school of Body-Mind Centering, founded by Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen (1993), is a particularly important practice for identifying which regions of bodily experience are missing or deficient in any particular bodily approach to the roots of personality. For that reason, it might be called a systems approach to Body Psychotherapy.

Like Isadora Duncan, Cohen began her career as a dancer. With Erick Hawkins, Cohen worked out experiences similar to the ones that Gendlin describes: moving, stopping, waiting, listening, allowing new movements, energized by new bodily impulses, images, memories, feelings. At the same time, her university education (as a physical and occupational therapist) prompted her to find ways to make that process more nuanced and articulate by engaging in a lifelong systematic investigation of the relationships between experienced realities and biomedical maps of the body. Experimenting on her own over many years, she discovered that each region of the lived body has its characteristic state of consciousness: images, feelings, sensations, intuitions about the world, perceptions of other people, words and ideas—in short, its own “mind” (Stark Smith, 1993, p. 64). As with Gendlin and Adler, the interface with psychology emerges when one methodi-

cally situates oneself in one of these regions, or *minds*, and patiently waits for new words and ideas to emerge from the experience itself.

Cohen went about her experiments in this way: She would pose to herself the question “What is the *mind* of the bones [or lungs, heart, thymus gland, . . .]?” For as long as it takes—sometimes, she says, a year or more for a particular system—she would spend hours a day working with movement and guided awareness to explore the regions mapped out by anatomical drawings of the bones of the body: the large and obvious bones of the legs and arms, as well as normally obscure bones, such as the metatarsals in the center of the foot, the tiny carpals in the hand, and the cranial bones. Over the months, she familiarized herself with the distinct qualities of this skeletal hinterland, its associated images, memories, emotions, thoughts, tones of voice, qualities of movement, words, and concepts rooted in that “mind.” After satisfying herself that she had gained enough information for the moment, she might then shift her work to the “mind” of the nervous system, spending months focusing on the contours and weather patterns in that realm. She has thus transformed biomedical maps from descriptions of an objectified body to maps of how to gain different experiences of the self.

[I find these things] through the sensory feedback system. If you move your pelvis with your bones in your sensation, it registers one way; if you move your pelvis with your muscles in your sensation, it registers another way; if you move with your organs in mind then it registers differently. (Stark Smith, 1981, p. 7)

Cohen’s experiments led her to find specific experiential practices for entry into a particular region—methodically directed breathing, movements, and attention. In the case of the glands, for example:

[I open the glands] through breathing into that area. Through sounding into that area. Through a hissing breath. And then through moving. Once you’ve located a place it is easy to initiate movement from there. We watch for what mind comes out of that place;

23 Janet Adler’s book details this process.

what actions come out of it; what are the efforts; what are the dynamics of that movement; what are the feelings and forms of that movement; what is the sound. All of that information comes out of that place . . . With the glands we went into automatic movement and watched what emerged. (Stark Smith, 1993, p. 57)

Over these years of work, she reached the ability to discern with clarity the experiential characteristics of one system of the body as contrasted with another:

From the gland work, I went into the nervous system more carefully, contrasting the control of the nervous system and the brain with the control of the glands. Working with the brain as a major control system after working with the glands was moving from a very hot, emotional, volatile, chaotic system of energy and process to a cool system of organization, clarity and crystallization. There's a wildness to the glands and a sense of control in the nervous system. (Ibid.)

As that quotation implies, her mapping is not confined to specific regions, but extends to relationships among regions: "If you are going to move one bone, another bone has to countersupport it. In the same way, if you are working with the nervous system, you balance it with the endocrine system and if you're in the endocrine, you support it with the nervous system" (Stark Smith, 1993, p. 64).

By exploring the layers of experience rooted in different regions of the body, Cohen has woven an intricate system for touching other people and giving them movement instructions that will lead them into unfamiliar regions of experience. She can focus so intently on her bones, as distinct from her muscles, as distinct from her organs, that her touch and movement instructions can help others find those same areas.

If I'm working with any area of someone else's body, I will go into that area of my own body to see. In the process I become more open also. It becomes like two bells ringing on the same pitch. We can resonate each other. (Ibid., p. 5)

Like the Jungian framework that provides a useful map for understanding limitations of the individual psyche to thinking, sensing, feeling, or imagining (Holifield, 1998), Cohen's practices reveal how a particular emphasis in Body Psychotherapy might be too confined to a particular class of bodily experiences. For example, some methods dwell exclusively on peristaltic and orgasmic movements; others, solely on sensing; others, on kinesthesia; and so forth. The Cohen framework constantly challenges practitioners to expand the repertoire of their experiences, so as to become familiar with other aspects of their "minds."

From these investigations, Cohen has derived a wide range of methods of touch and body-movement direction. Even though she makes no claims that her work is any form of psychotherapy (Aposhyan, 2004),<sup>24</sup> the practice has profound implications for bodily based refinements of familiar concepts of attunement, presence, projective identification, and empathy. In the education of therapists, there is always the perplexing question of how to educate novices in these essential aspects of the clinical relationship. The practices of Body-Mind Centering add a rich complexity of detail to what can otherwise be an empty idea. Gaining the facility to enter a variety of discrete bodily states can give the therapist an identifiable, teachable repertoire of possibilities for perceiving the experiential world of one's client and entering that world with him or her. This is a different form of Rogerian listening, methodically rooted in bodily experience, lifted to the most subtle nuances of intricate experiential contact between therapist and client: fluid to fluid, lungs to lungs, bone to bone, thymus to thymus.

### The Primacy of Experiential Practice over Conceptual Systems

One tangible difference that appears institutionally between European and American notions of theory and practice is that Body-Oriented or Somatic Psychology in the United States is an academic discipline offered in the psychology

<sup>24</sup> Susan Aposhyan has shown how Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen's work can form the basis for an approach to Body Psychotherapy (see Aposhyan, 2004).

departments of many universities, whereas in Europe, even though there are some academic professorships in this field, it is pursued principally within private groups offering practical training outside of academia.

Eugene Gendlin, Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, and Janet Adler embody a characteristically American approach to theory construction, representative of the robust intellectual pragmatist tradition articulated by William James, C. S. Peirce, and John Dewey. Knowledge, in this tradition, gets its validation in experiential action, which, upon reflection, reshapes preexisting words and theories.<sup>25</sup>

Bodily practices are not simply, or even primarily, techniques for therapists to use with clients; they are also considered essential in the very education and continuous cultivation of the therapist. A particular clinical session may even look—to the outsider—like any other kind of psychotherapy, with both therapist and client sitting in chairs discoursing. But the experiential world is very different, with the therapist having cultivated a highly skilled sensitivity to nuances in the client's nonverbal expressions, hints in his or her discourse of bodily references, distortions of body image, and many other aspects that reveal themselves only to one who has become richly situated within his or her own bodily reality by sustained practices of bodily exploration. This educated sensibility creates a different kind of attunement and empathy unique to Body Psychotherapy, a deeply embodied connection absent in exclusively verbal modes of therapy.

To understand this difference between a European and a North American tradition, it is helpful to situate both

with reference to Asian notions of mind and body. Yasuo Yuasa is a Japanese scholar of the relation between bodily practices—martial arts, meditation, theater, music, writing practices—and theory development on the part of practitioners. He argues that the most profound difference between Asian and European intellectual traditions lies in the priority given to theory or practice:

What might we discover to be the philosophical uniqueness of Eastern thought? One revealing characteristic is that personal “cultivation” is presupposed in the philosophical foundation of Eastern theories. To put it simply, true knowledge cannot be obtained simply by means of theoretical thinking, but only through “bodily recognition or realization,” that is, through the utilization of one's total mind and body. Simply stated, this is to “learn with the body,” not the brain. Cultivation is a practice that attempts, so to speak, to achieve true knowledge by means of one's total mind and body. (Yuasa, 1987, p. 25)<sup>26</sup>

The break, he argues, between theory and practice is an exact mirror of the Cartesian gap between mind and body, where theory is the principle of order. Practice is merely the shaping of so-called “chaotic” experience by the mind, having no intrinsic intelligibility apart from the theories that shape it.

The Japanese view is helpful in mitigating a tendency of Europeans to mistake a North American emphasis on practice and experience for a trivial anti-intellectualism. America lies between the two great intellectual traditions of Asia and Europe; it has been a place where experimental practices occurring within a reflective communal atmosphere have taken precedence over preexisting theories imported whole cloth from the Old Worlds, East and West. The populist current of Body Psychotherapy or Somatic Psychology has its unique flavor from the fact that psychotherapists identified with this field are involved in the

25 Two books that give a very important picture of the relationships between American philosophy and Somatics are: Thomas Hanna's *Bodies in Revolt: A Primer in Somatic Thinking* (San Francisco: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1970); and Bruce W. Wilshire's *The Primal Roots of American Philosophy: Pragmatism, Phenomenology, and Native American Thought* (Harrisburg: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000). Wilshire has been particularly important in articulating the implications of the well-known fact that John Dewey studied with F. M. Alexander for more than twenty years. Dewey's crafting of the enormously important system of progressive education is a direct application of the Alexander Technique to the structures of teacher-training and curriculum development.

26 See also Y. Yuasa, *The Body, Self-Cultivation, and Ki-Energy* (Shigenori Nagatomo & Monte Hull, Trans.). New York: SUNY Press, 1993.

methodical investigation of many regions of bodily experience through long-term skillful practices outside the clinical relationship itself. Therapists bring to the clinical relationship the results of such practice—juice, contact, and a readier access to intrapsychic material. They also continually reshape their thinking about the nature of therapy in light of these practices.

Righting the imbalance of theory over practice within the field of Body Psychotherapy or Somatic Psychology might be helpful in creating a more communal dialogue where participants and practitioners might join in shared reflections on the specific intricacies of the practices themselves. This is a basis for a grounded collaborative, field-generating discourse, and for appropriate research models. I have made a very modest foray into advancing such a model (Johnson, 2000). Most of the approaches to Body-Oriented Psychology and Psychotherapy share practices of breathing, touching, and sensing. But there is little common development of the descriptions of how these practices are used in any particular school of work and their results. What are the experiential differences, for example, between different styles and rhythms of touch? Or between working with clients clothed, or in their underwear? Or between moving with eyes open, or eyes closed? Or between giving specific kinds of guided imagery to explore body regions? Or between allowing clients or directing them in certain postures, movements, and sensations?

Such a shift of focus away from already-formed theories of how the body impacts psychology into the less verbose world of experiential practices might help foster the embodied sense of community that Wilhelm Reich (1933/1970, p. xxiii) called a “work democracy,” a badly needed model of sane collaboration in an increasingly insane world.

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