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## Bioenergetics and the Spirits of Experimentation

Bioenergetics is a system of psychotherapy and reeducation developed by Alexander Lowen from the pioneering work of Wilhelm Reich. Unfortunately, for many people it has been misidentified as pillow hitting and loud screaming. More than a few people have come to my workshops who have had prior group experience in which the leader has told a participant to vent his feelings on some object nearby (usually a pillow - they're soft and don't hit back) and then the leader, probably more unknowingly than deceptively, has termed this activity 'bioenergetics'.

Like Humpty Dumpty in *Through The Looking Glass*, we certainly all have the right to make a word mean precisely what we 'choose it to mean - neither more nor less.' But however much this stance protects 'the blessed autonomy of the individual, it does not make for very good communication. I'm writing this introductory paper in the hope of clarifying some basic ideas about bioenergetics, particularly for those people who have had no exposure to it. In addition, I'll discuss some ideas for environments for group work in bioenergetics and Gestalt therapy which I've been experimenting with and hope to develop further during some long-term groups for the Quaesitor growth center in London during the Spring of 1974.

The basic premise of bioenergetics is that the person in our culture has lost contact

with himself as a unified physical body. The word 'unified' is important here, because many people may be aware of certain sensations and feelings, but not of their body as a meaningful whole. This lack of unity is structured in the body in part through chronically tightened musculature and restricted breathing. This is the physical basis for the repression of feelings and this concrete formulation is, as other writers have pointed out, one of Wilhelm Reich's greatest contributions. Bioenergetic theorists hypothesise that this retreat from full feeling and sensation starts to occur quite early in childhood, so the forming sense of identity is not grounded in the body but more often than no rests on the shaky supports of ideas and formulations swallowed whole from parents and teachers about who one should be.

Let's take a simplified example. It is a natural event for a child to reach out with open arms. When this behaviour is blocked by punishment or inattention, the child may learn to inhibit reaching and the muscles used to block the impulse may in time become chronically held - thus the act of reaching itself seldom occurs any more. As an adult the person may still have trouble reaching out: with words, a phone call, a gift, as well as being blocked at the most basic physical level. The bioenergetic therapist might help this person get in contact with the need for reaching and his lack of

mobility; help to show him how past circumstances might have led to this holding back; help free his expressive movements on a physical level; and help to integrate the many levels of reaching out, thus restoring some contact, meaning, expression and unity to his life.

Of course the inhibited reacher is an oversimplification. The person may also be restricted in his breathing, many of his expressive movements, and his contact with the ground. The last is a most important concept in bioenergetics, known generally as 'grounding'. Many definitions of this term abound in the literature. I generally tell people new to my groups to look upon grounding as the process of getting more in touch with their support functions - in particular being in contact with their legs and feet and working on the psychological-physical ways they are limited in being truly self-supportive. Initial work on the psychological level might perhaps focus on where in his life the individual cannot be truly independent and 'stand on his own two feet'; concomitantly, physical work with the legs might be encouraged, such as various forms of kicking, standing in stress positions, or some direct physical manifestation of the leg muscles, all with the aim of reducing some of the holding patterns of tension in the legs that would restrict contact, support, and expression. As with all bioenergetic therapy, the physical and psychological work go hand in hand and both levels are regarded as aspects of the same reality.

Lowen's emphasis on the expressive movements of the voluntary muscular system and on grounding are his particular contributions to Reich's original work and his energetic model. This model concerns itself with the ways energy is manifested in the individual. It

assumes that given a reasonably good heredity and a benign uterine environment, we are born without too many restrictions to a free flow of energy in our bodies. As a result of being civilized, at times brutally, we learn to hold back, compress, restrict, and limit this flow. One way we do this is through holding chronically in the muscular system. However, it's assumed that restrictions exist on many other physiological levels, such as the circulatory system, as well.

In a bioenergetic session generally the person 'charges up' through increased breathing. This will very often have the effect of putting him in touch with his misery. Before, in his semi-deadened state of lowered separation, he was unaware of his constrictions, but with more breathing, they often become painfully apparent. It is as if there is a stream of energy going through our bodies, blocked and dammed at certain points with some of the stream trickling through. This is the settled state of affairs, and we are more or less unaware of the trickle. With increased energy available from heightened breathing, however, the stream starts to turn into a river, and when the increased force meets one of the dams or constrictions, we now can become more acutely aware of the blockages.

As people I work with become more aware of how they restrict themselves in their bodies, I begin to encourage them to experiment with ways of being more expressive in a variety of ways. On a verbal level, I'll encourage my clients to go out and stand up for their rights, with complimenting people or acknowledging compliments, to disagree and to express tenderness. Concurrently I'll utilize Gestalt therapy to work through

unfinished business which may prevent their going on to new ways of expressing themselves in the present. Using bioenergetics, I'll set up situations where they may explore some basic expressions such as reaching out or hitting. I will at the same time emphasize that I am *not* suggesting they reach out to the first person they meet on the street or that they go out and hit people. A lot of nonsense has been written about the danger of people going out and hitting other people if they hit a pillow or bed. Any well-trained therapist knows which kinds of people need encouragement in hitting and which need encouragement in containing such impulses

It is important that one be on guard against regarding bioenergetic therapy as the process of turning out bioenergetic athletes. Everyone does not need to be the same, thank God, and the sensitive therapist must attend to what the patient feels ultimately suits him, his environment, and his life style. All of these may change in the course of therapy, but the idea that everyone must, for instance, be very assertive is but another form of fascism, not freedom. What I'm therefore espousing is to let the individual experiment and to trust his sense of himself after long and deep experimentation.

I therefore believe it of utmost importance to create an environment for therapy of reeducation which is favorable to experimentation, a place in which many facets of a human being may emerge. And for the therapist to draw a true picture of whom he's working with, he must beware of rigidifying the environment in which he sees the person.

For some years I've worked with many of my clients in groups as well as

individually. Generally the course has run that I'd work with a person a while once a week individually. They he might join a weekly, ongoing Gestalt-oriented group while continuing to see me for bioenergetic and Gestalt therapy individually on a less frequent basis. As the group generally grew more significant for him and he could learn to work in it and make contact with people other than me, we'd discontinue the individual appointments and work only in the group setting. This gave the client a range of environmental Gestals in which to work and experiment. It seems to me this process is not unlike that of a child who first has the exclusive attention of the parent and they slowly learns to go out in the world, mobilizing both himself and others aside from just the parent for his contact needs.

At the time of writing this paper, I've initiated a more extensive experiment in therapeutic, or reeducational, environments. The results are not in as yet but the 'experimental design' excites me a good deal. I've selected a well-functioning group of people who meet with me in my home one day a week from 10 in the morning until 4 in the afternoon. During this time my entire house is available to them. Thus, if we move into small group or dyadic work, people can find a room or spot that feels good to them at the moment, allowing for such choices as privacy, openness, distance, size of room, and so forth. Moreover, people are constantly urged to view the group and the environment experimentally. If, for instance, I suggest to group members that they spend 15 minutes in meditation, or sitting and centering in their body, I'll also suggest that prior to this, they try moving around the house until they find a spot that feel right in which to settle. My inspiration here comes from Carlos Castaneda, the

author of *The Teachings of Don Juan*, whose teacher suggested he spend as long as necessary on a porch until he found 'his' spot. Castaneda spent hours roaming and crawling around the porch and finally came upon a spot in which he sat and became instantly transported to a state of Grace. We have by no means been as dedicated as Castaneda; most of my people found their spot for the day within five minutes. However, the principle of *finding what suits one* remains the same.

People in the group are also encouraged to experiment with variables such as seating arrangements. They are told to feel free to move furniture - or anything - about to create new environments for the group. We each bring a dish of food for the entire group for lunch each week. My first thought was to tell some people to bring cheese, some fruit, some meat, etc. I then realized it would be more in keeping with the spirit of the group to see what would happen without imposing a

structure on this situation beforehand; if everyone brought cheese one day we'd see what it was like to have a meal composed totally of different kinds of cheeses, and perhaps have a very novel and enjoyable experience we might have missed otherwise.

Thus, what I'm attempting to do in the group is to create an atmosphere of experimentation with all aspects of the group: setting, food, and of course, the psychological work itself. As in my individual therapy sessions, when I work bioenergetically with people in this group I don't tell them how they should be - that they should have particular kinds of feelings or that they should strive to have a 'bioenergetically perfect' body. I do suggest that they try out new ways of breathing, expressing, and simply being in the world. Thus the background environment of the group and the work itself reflect a spirit of freedom and experimentation that I regard as vital for new learning to occur.

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Jerome Liss

## Emotions and The Life Energy

To clear stuck reactions by means of the 'rising and subsiding' of emotional discharge has the following consequences:

1. Several consecutive feelings may be discharged, rather than just one feeling.
2. Unpleasurable distress transforms into pleasurable warmth.
3. The person's life energy intensifies. These dramatic effects are based on direct observation of the emotional discharge process.