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Steps to Transfiguration: Birth moments in Human Experience

Extract from a forthcoming book: *Lifestreams*.

When energy flows from the central reservoirs of the body it can move either into the motor system, seeking physical expression in movement, or into the channels of communication, - touch, eye-contact, speech.

Expression and communication are different functions. Emotional expression can take place in a room on your own. People who do 'self-primalling' (primal therapy sessions on their own) may cry, scream, kick, and enter into any number of involuntary body movements. These are expressive of what they are feeling, but they are not communications. Communications are what you share: the presence of another person able to respond in some way is essential for communication.

Grounding is concerned with what happens when energy flows out towards the surface of the body and the quality of contact it finds there. If energy flows out and there is no contact, the energy cannot ground itself: instead it is *thrown*. A lot of people are bursting out with repressed feelings, there is ample emotional expression, but no grounding for it.

The newborn child discovers many groundings: he lies across the mother's abdomen and is grounded on the outside of her body, sensing the same rhythms and heartbeat he has previously experienced inside. He holds and is held, encloses part of her in a hand, or in the curl of his body, and is enclosed by the contact with her. In all the progressive movements from lying prone, to holding his head up, through crawling and squatting, to standing, he learns good or poor contact with the physical ground. When he sucks at the breast, he could be said to be grounding his mouth. When he looks at her face, he can be said to be grounding his eyes. In the flow of developing language he begins to ground his ideas.

Because these various forms of grounding have gone wrong for so many people, therapeutic work involves experience in re-contacting the ground.

Let us begin by considering the two ends of the body. The feet stand on the ground, the head is furthest removed from it. In bio-energetics we are familiar with the idea that a person who is 'stuck in his head' is pulled away from the ground. The foundation point for Lowen's departure from Reich, in developing bio-energetics, is really his use of the concept of the ground.

Lowen has systematically develop a number of dynamic positions that facilitate the flow of energy down the body and into the feet. He has deeply enriched our approach to standing and to ways of holding one's ground. To understand the concept of grounding in its totality, however, we need to return for a moment to fundamentals, for grounding involves much more than standing, as Lowen I am sure would agree.

The foetus in the womb not only experiences umbilical affect and foetal skin affect, as Mott has described, it also experiences kinaesthetic affect, - the flow of feeling that comes from using his muscles in smooth co-ordinated movements. At first these movements are primitive swimming movements. The baby, when born, can readily learn to swim long before it is ready to walk, because the support given by water calls for less voluntary co-ordination than is required to stand erect on land. The earliest experiences of intra-uterine swimming, associated as they are with the oceanic feelings of containment and contentment, are most closely approximated in latter life in special conditions of water or air which encourage floating and weightlessness: suspension in a warm pool; sky-diving or hang-gliding. The first time that the organism focusses and harnesses his muscular patterns to ground himself decisively is in the experience of birth, where the baby propels himself by reflex extensions of the feet, *head-first*, and against slowly yielding resistance, into the outside world.

These foetal convulsive movements have already been described. Paul Ritter described them as the 'I want to get out' reflex. The birth reflex movements resemble, but are different from those of the orgasm reflex. Let us look at some of the principal differences:-

Birth reflex

The ends of the body push away from each other at the peak of the thrust.

The reflex is triggered by pressure at both ends of the body (soles of the feet, top of head)

The movements lead the organism from unconsciousness (floating) towards consciousness (landing)

The urge is: I want to get out.

Orgasm reflex

The ends of the body pull together at the peak of the thrust.

The reflex is triggered by charge at the centre of the body (genital focus)

The movements lead the organism from groundedness (standing, reality, every day life) with an alert consciousness, towards more centred state (relaxing, melting, dimming of consciousness, oceanic feelings).

The urge is: I want to get in, or take in.

The extensor thrust is in contrast to the embryonic position of the previous nine months.

The embryonic curves towards which the ends of the body move in orgasm, are in contrast to the extensor position of adult existence.

Now for some of the similarities: both reflexes involve the body in a more total way than most other experiences. Both are pleasurable, involuntary and involve powerful surges of energy focussed in specific directions.

The birth-reflex is the basic organismic function which underlies all a person's success or failure in grounding himself on the earth or in life. It can be recovered and re-experienced in adult life, fairly readily, by placing a person in a curled up position, lying down, (usually on the side) and applying a firm pressure to the head and to the feet. A procedure like this was introduced and is regularly used by Frank Lake, who pioneered the process of re-birthing in this country. He has the subject lie down with their feet against the wall, and cups their head in his hands, one hand behind the head, one hand over the face. The subject is encouraged to relax and to breathe deeply. After a period of time, when the person lies quietly, small extensor movements of the legs begin, and eventually drive the person somewhat away from the wall. At this point Lake has three or more people move in to become a human wall and to reflex the legs. They are taking over the function of the fundus of the womb. The course of the subsequent experience varies according to the birth-history of the individual going through it. but the organismic experience of tremendous propulsive effort moving towards a climax of crowning, can be recovered in many cases. Much will depend on the prior degree of holding or tension in the body. When I first witnessed these convulsive and propulsive body movements, the word that came to mind for them was 'situation': the body insinuates itself through space, move sinuously across the room. It is as though the whole muscular body sheath functions like a gut in peristalsis, expanding and contracting rhythmically and powerfully in aggressive locomotor movements. Later I discovered that D. W. Winnicott had used the word 'reptation' to describe the same phenomenon.

He writes:-

"In the ordinary birth the head of the infant is the forward point and does the work of dilating the maternal soft parts. There are several ways in which this is remembered. There may be retained as important a mode of progression which can be described by the word 'reptation'. This word appears in a book by Casteret, called MY CAVES. The author is describing the way he gets through holes in deep cave exploration. The point about reptation is that the arms are not of any use, nor the hands. In fact the reason why there is any forward movement is not clearly known to the author. I suppose that in the memory trace of a normal birth there would be no sense of helplessness. The infant would feel that the swimming movements of which we know a foetus is capable, and the movements that I have referred to under the word reptation, produce the forward movements".

Sometimes the process of initiating this movement pattern triggers deep repressed birth memories, and reactivates the primal struggle to live or struggle to die. At other times it acts as an integrating focus for the aggressive (forward moving) energies of the body, and gives the individual an experience of directedness and muscular focus that is both a source of deep pleasure, and a source of insight into the muscular patterns and character patterns that usually block him from such satisfaction in his adult motor expressions. He is experiencing the basis of his groundedness.

The movement from lying to standing, in the post-natal period, is also led by the head, moving upwards, in opposition to the feet which press downwards. In therapeutic work with grounding it is possible to take a person through the various stages of erectness, from lying on the floor, to raising the head into the upright position (horizontal eye-contact), to support on the arms, to a kneeling position on all fours, through to squatting (the embryonic position with support from the ground), through to standing.

If the emphasis of this work is not on the final end-position, but on the *experience of transition* between positions, a whole range of buried feelings and new sensations become possible. Worlds of childhood are locked away in the muscular habit-patterns we learned in adapting to gravity, and contracting against our own rhythms. Take a simple example: a person lies back, relaxes and accepts support, breathing deeply. He is encouraged to sit up, slowly, and to stay as relaxed as possible, but to support himself now in the sitting position. Very often what happens is that the breathing is unconsciously restricted. Why is this? Is the position a cramping one. No, it is perfectly possible to breathe deeply when sitting, as it is to breathe deeply when standing. The reason is that sitting up is associated with the social role of being more adult, less animal, more controlled, more responsive to demands of others. And standing, for many people, is similarly the statement of their tense preparedness to act with control upon the world.

In encouraging a person to move, with awareness and relaxation, in slowness, from state to state, we discover a whole spontaneous yoga of the body. Tony Crisp, who works with these movements states in his Ashram in Devon, believes that the traditional asanas (body positions) of yoga are merely ritualised and systematised forms of spontaneous body expressions. I learned from Stanley Keleman that making very slight postural adjustments to the body can produce profound alterations to internal rhythms, muscular tonus, self-image and body feelings, provided that the postural adjustments are not carried out as bits of mechanical engineering on structure, but are contact-experiences, the helper using his hands to sense out the buried life expression in the person he is helping. Judy, in a group I took, was exploring the position of crawling. She got in touch with a lot of buried anger which came out in the form of growling and snarling which were helped by the animal position of being grounded on four limbs. As she felt the four points of contact with the ground, and the aggressive energy surged up her back, it erected her neck (which had previously been hanging downwards under gravity) and the aggressive charge came through into her eyes. This

was a woman who had had many difficulties with eye contact, and whose character tendency was to withdraw from the ground and defocus with her eyes. The work of grounding distributes energy out towards all the contact points of the organism. She related afterwards that much of the anger was concerned with the memory of being made to stand too early by her mother who did not like a child crawling round at her feet. A child who is robbed of a crucial stage of its groundedness (in this case the crawling position) is deprived of what it needs to focus aggressive energy for onward movement in later life. To reclaim one's crawling may be a necessary preliminary to the exploration of more contactful standing.

Positions of squatting may involve powerful emotions of guilt, disgust, power, contempt, aggression, self-assertion in relation to shitting. Excretion and locomotion both develop around the same time. A person who has contracted buttocks and anal sphincter because of conflicts in this area, has inhibited walking, and contactless standing. Rick was a man who had been through a public school education which had over-intellectualised him and left him with a lot of withheld aggression and anal guilt. We worked out some of his anger and connected him with some of the feelings of mixed helplessness and power in the squatting position. Then I took his hands and moved him very slowly from the squatting position towards uprightness. On the way up I am looking for qualities of response. Where I detect a quality of resonating energy, an extra tremor or tension in the flow of movement, I wait in this position to see what arises. With Rick, what was triggered half way between squatting and standing, was deep grief connected with the death of his father at the age of three. The slow standing with support brought back the organismic memory of getting support from his father when learning to stand, the loss of that support on his father's death, and the subsequent need to take on too early the tensions he associated with being a man. In place of mature standing, he had developed an over-active under-standing.

In re-experiencing the flow of movement expression as the body gathers itself against gravity, and organises itself with the minimum degree of tension that is functional in order to be upright, it is as though we are recovering ancient evolutionary rhythms. Fishlike, birdlike, and reptilian movements occur. In the orgasm reflex, Reich compared man to a jellyfish, opening and closing in a basic pulsatile pattern. The jellyfish is beautifully centred, but it cannot function on land. In moving from lying to standing we recapitulate the movement of life from the waters on to land.

We can understand how it is possible for a group of people to be held spellbound, silent and in awe, at the experience of one person at the centre, who, in the course of perhaps only half an hour, recaptures some of this evolutionary movement flow as he changes from lying to uprightness. Charlotte Selver, in her work on sensory awareness, talks of the process of 'coming to standing'.

Much of a person's body tensions are organised against the fear of falling.

The person who cannot fall easily, will find it hard to fall in love. Reich relates fear of falling to orgasm anxiety, since both are based on contraction against pleasurable streaming:-

"As I have shown clinically, orgasm anxiety is always based on falling anxiety; the rapid and extreme convulsion in the orgasm is experienced as falling if it cannot take its course freely. In contrast the free, uninhibited orgasmic convulsion conveys the sensation of floating or flying".

Many adults reveal their fear of falling in their locked knees, tightened buttocks, tense ankle joints, and general rigidity. Lowen has developed a number of exercises aimed at helping a person to become aware of the unconscious ways he tenses himself against falling. Group experiences where a person allows himself to fall and be caught by the group not only builds trust, but re-educate the body to its own currents of flow. I worked with a woman called Dorothy who could allow herself to fall backwards and be caught, but who was unconsciously holding her breath. When she allowed herself to repeat the falling experience but to breathe out on the fall, it became an alive experience instead of a mechanical one: now she felt strong inner currents of excitation that she had not felt since a child, pleasurable streaming from the centre of the body out towards the extremities. The excitatory currents are the same as the 'roller-coaster' sensations which children get from swings, and are closely related to the streams of free-flowing energy that occur when the body is allowed to melt in orgasm. In orgasm the body is made as if weightless. For Dorothy who had a dry, controlled, rather desert-like character, this experience put her in direct touch with her underground springs, the sap of her own vitality. Falling was thus the gateway to her own process.

Walking is really controlled falling. As we take a step forward we destabilise the body from its uprightness, and the body begins to fall. Putting a leg forward arrests the fall momentarily, and as the other leg moves the body again starts to fall, and is again caught from the fall in time in the onward movements of locomotion. A person afraid to fall, and tensed against gravity, therefore cannot walk freely. He has lost the pleasure of simply walking. Walking is always to get somewhere.

Some of the deepest experiences people have contacted which help them to connect with the process of their own with-held life, have arisen out of new qualities of standing and walking. We have to help people re-experience their body stance, re-align the body, so that it stands as though for the first time, with all the surge of achievement, and vitality that belongs to the erect position. Sometimes just the experience of standing in a new way becomes intensely alive, so much so that a person is pouring sweat just standing on the spot, the body pulsating gently, or sometimes vibrating strongly, as the muscles release some of their normal store of dammed up energy and this becomes available to nourish the whole person. A walk,

as though for the first time, become a practice ground for trying out the pleasure of new steps, a testing place for whether one can allow the flow of anxiety to wax and wane, without contracting, or falling over. These are birth moments in human experience. Such simple actions, in a sensitive context, with slight guidance, can give a person the experience of a flow of life he is normally never in contact with, They transform him. He looks transfigured. He begins to re-organise himself and his life.

Stanley Keleman introduced me to the concept of the imaginary body. The imaginary body is the potential body that is blocked from expression by the tensions and habit patterns by which we learn to structure ourselves. Experience outside the usual structuring allows in new life. A person has a taste of life outside the usual structures he shackles himself by. The imaginary body is his glimpse of what he could become, a direction in which he can transform himself. It may take many such experiences, repeated in the context of ongoing work in oneself, before the imaginary body can become the real body, the body of a person who has become alive again.

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The Angel that presided o'er my birth
Said "Little creature, form'd of Joy & Mirth,
"Go love without the help of any thing on Earth."

William Blake

Our Birth is but a sleep and a forgetting. . .

Wm. Wordsworth

My mother groan'd! my father wept.
Into the dangerous world I leapt:
Helpless, naked, piping loud:
Like a fiend hid in a cloud.

Struggling in my father's hands,
Striving against my swaddling bands,
Bound and weary I thought best
To sulk upon my mother's breast.

William Blake