
PRIMAL INTEGRATION . . . REFLECTIONS ON PRACTICE

by

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We feel fortunate regarding our foundation in primal work and grateful to the pioneers in this area both historical and contemporary. What we want to do in this article is reflect on our practice of primal integration and share some of what we have learned in working over the years.

We are in our eighth year of independent work. It was in our third when Richard first commented that he felt that a true coalescence had taken place of the influences of our two main teachers, Bill Swartley and Frank Lake. Something that was more than the sum of those influences was now in being.

It will be difficult to describe either Bill or Frank in a few words, even bearing in mind that we are dealing only with aspects of these two great people that are relevant to us.

Bill was an American psychologist with a broad background and a well developed sense of adventure. If what you presented was not within his horizon, then his horizon would expand to give you the benefit of the doubt. Whilst being quite at home with catharsis and chaos, talking and thinking were not taboo activities in his groups - Bill recognised their

importance in a balanced therapy process. There was little structure in his groups, and plenty of permission to explore and experiment. One had a true taste of the freedom and responsibility of self-direction. Guidance was there on demand, but there was little coaxing. Challenging though this route may be in some ways, the progress (hard) won this way was for keeps.

Frank Lake was a British psychiatrist with a Christian background, thereby bringing prayer and therapy together and working comfortably with that in such a way that caused controversy in some areas and rejoicing in others. He brought 'God' into the therapy room, and he wasn't fussed about which 'God' you preferred, and it's amazing how much more becomes possible with His (or Her) Help. Frank provided a very structured environment, in contrast to Bill, with a guided fantasy providing the 'way in'. He stressed the importance of having one's 'Adult' present in doing primal work. He encouraged team work in groups on the premise that attending to someone else would better help you to attend to your own pain in your turn. The sheer human goodness about the

place, the safety and care tugged at one's most vulnerable self and allowed it to emerge. On the more mundane (but no less important) level the tea trolley would be wheeled in at intervals for regular breaks before resuming the primal journey.

At about the time of the 'coalescence', we introduced the phrase "both the freedom to stretch one's wings and the security to explore one's most vulnerable and fearful states of being" into the Open Centre write-up on our work, which has remained in essence unchanged for eight years!

For us, theory follows practice as often as the other way around. Maps, typologies etc, like techniques, are to be kept handy until needed, like tools in a bag. We rely on intuition as well as a sort of 'creative synthesis' of information whilst working. Furthermore, as soon as we feel we have worked something out, something reliable that works in most cases, the next person to come our way will not do any of it, never does any 'proper primal work' and yet there is something there; their life genuinely improves . . . so we cheerfully quote: "you must always leave room for the possibility of miracles".

We operate under the name Primal Integration because it was handed on to us by Bill Swartley who coined the term. Also we like it because it is beautifully and simply descriptive. "Primal" refers to our openness to, knowledge of, and perhaps bias towards the relevance of early life experience in human development. "Primal" means fundamental, first

in time, and we mean very early experiences, from the point of conception onwards. There are times when it is indicated that a person's relevant journey began in what seems to be a life before this one. Later experiences are important in their own right, and sometimes they also serve to open the gates to the earlier "stuff".

"Integration" refers to what you do with the primal "stuff" now that you have conscious access to it. At the close of our weekend groups we ask the question "so what?". So what is the relevance of your dramatic re-experience of your birth? Integration is the aspect of this work that looks out for life in the present, mindful of living now, taking on board change as the process unfolds. "The here and now waits for no one".

Primal Integration is not about screaming. It is about human experience and if that contains something worthy of screaming about, fine; often it does not. Noise is not a measure of therapeutic prowess.

It is one of our most dearly held premises that staying with one's experience of the moment will give way to the truth of its primal origin. The experiencing and where appropriate abreaction of that, makes the way clear for healing and change at depth. So it is more often a case of not doing things than figuring out what to do, and this is the hard part. "Is this It??" There are of course also times when doing is more appropriate. For whatever we say here, exactly the opposite could also be true. Therapy is a living individual process and its

facilitation requires an agility of response, and an attitude of attention, awe and respect.

The term 'regression' in relation to this sort of work can be misleading but is unfortunately difficult to replace. One of the most common questions at our introductory talks (so much so that we lay informal bets on who will ask it!) is "how do you get them to regress?" People often have expectations of a sort of transformational time travel, to a forgotten world disconnected with this one. The problem is the reverse; that the past is all too connected with the here and now world but not recognised as such. What should be known as a memory is still felt and perceived as an active component of the present, thereby distorting its true potential (both positive and negative). So, 'regression' as we use the term, does not mean 'going back' but simply realising that one is already regressed. The natural progression from that is to be able to tell the difference between the two realities, thereby allowing time to be set in right relationship. Eventually, unfinished business is laid to rest in its proper place as 'memory', still an ineradicable part of one's history, but no longer a live concern.

Unfinished business, repressed feeling, split-off experience wants to rise to the surface under its own dynamic pressure. Therefore it will seek out, attract, construe, manipulate, and in some instances just plain manufacture situations to reflect the inner 'business' thereby bringing it openly to life again for another chance of completion and integration. Conversely, events can

be manipulated or encouraged to mimic one's inner experience and aid in its journey to consciousness. The trick here is balance. The present has to be convincing enough for the experience to be 'real' but safe enough and different enough from the original to make a different route possible this time. This balance can be illustrated thus: A good movie, say of the horror variety, is convincing enough so that you really experience being terrified, but not so much so that you shut your eyes and hold your breath or even hide under the seat (suppression) or run out of the cinema altogether (split off). We work to achieve this balance by being both adventuresome in our suggestions and interventions (convincing enough) and careful (safe enough).

The 'Stop, I Mean It' rule is one of our Ground Rules (a legacy from Bill), which are fundamental to our work. The very existence of the 'Stop, I Mean It' rule is an intrinsic reminder that what is taking place is a therapeutic process involving the reliving of past trauma for the purposes of healing and that that trauma is not occurring in the present. Even though the experience may feel as bad as the original and the person helping to intensify it may appear every bit as threatening as Mummy ever did, with the 'Stop, I Mean It' rule you have the power to stop it. Of course things do happen in the present and need to be recognised as such. But in the therapy setting, for working purposes only, the present needs to be 'good enough' then set to one side to let the 'worse' past situation rise to the surface. The 'Stop, I Mean It'

rule is the client's veto on how fast this happens (self-regulation) and it's everybody's access to 'adulthood' their own and others'.

Our second most important ground rule is 'No Violence', which is to ensure that no physical damage results from the expression of feelings. Apart from the obvious safety consideration in this, it is also concerned with differentiating past and present. In assuming, as we do, that the feeling being contacted is likely to be from the past, the task to hand is to remember it, to experience it as it really was. In the case of rage for example, expressing that feeling with the help of an inanimate object (cushion) that is with maximum imagination and minimum actuality can help the true picture to emerge. It will not do anyone any good to assault a fellow group member, because they are being 'just like my mother!', even though it may well feel like a good idea at the time! Without such complications in the present, the expression of the rage can give way to what lies beneath it; the (past) reality that although you were feeling as if you could murder her, in fact you were so little and helpless and dependent on her for your very survival that you couldn't. And coming to terms with that is the relevant growth move.

What we are referring to as 'unfinished business' or primal material makes itself known in a myriad of different ways. The picture-book memory of sitting in your pram is relatively rare. The primal material is in fact an opportunity for growth, a half-forgotten 'self' vying for

recognition, cleverly disguised as, say, a pain in the neck. Or some other physical ailment, or emotional lack or excess, or dream or fantasy, or obsession, or belief, or life pattern . . . Foetuses turn up in the most unlikely places . . . These experiences and 'selves' hold energy back from living, and their release and integration restores that energy to the ongoing process of maturation.

We find transference a useful tool in the facilitation of primal work. Its occurrence is so inevitable it would seem a waste not to use it! Ignore it at your peril! It is a very effective bridge between the past and present. It follows that relationships formed within the therapy setting are there firstly to be explored therapeutically and secondly, maybe, to be taken as 'normal'. The therapy environment is an unusual place where permission is given for the expression of all sorts of states of being not normally appropriate or acceptable 'outside'. Very powerful and basic feelings are evoked and need to be contained as they are recognised for what they are and worked through. It is therefore important that the boundary between the therapy setting and 'outside' is recognised and maintained.

One of the most enticing pitfalls of primal integration is the mistaken expectation that it has something to do with 'sorting out' one's past. It has not. One of nature's simple truths is that a moment passed is exactly that, done, history. Nobody can re-write history. There are so many ways to try and get around this fact! A favourite is the notion that

the goodness and potential that exists in the present can somehow be transposed back into the past bad and hopeless situation, thereby remedying it. Someone is nominated as parent, often the therapist, and is expected to 'get it right this time'. Unfortunately, no amount of love and care now can affect what happened then; it only offers an alternative experience of the world. The past hurt will seek to emerge, to be experienced, to be healed. The only thing you can take back into your own memory is yourself, your increased strength and ability to 'bear it'. 'Yourself' in turn is supported, aided and abetted in your task by us, other people, and God (not necessarily in that order!)

Once a past trauma has been released, a spontaneous urge for growth will appear. It's as if the growth wants to carry on where it left off before it was so rudely interrupted! Here we offer 'goodies' - little treats, body contact and so on - to encourage the growth of these new found parts. A couple of examples that come to mind are a woman who was a caesarian delivery had a spontaneous urge to have a normal birth experience, thus releasing those reflexes in her body. Another person discovered he had a six year old 'child' who had been too terrified to be there at the time.

For a while then colouring- books and trips to the park became a part of his life alongside normal duties as an engineer. These parts do grow up, usually quite rapidly, and contribute their energy and qualities to the person as a whole. There is a palpable difference between this sort of re-growing 'child' within and a static 'I won't grow up!' primal child. The latter is repetitive, somehow unreachable, unresponsive except selectively; there is a draining aspect to relating to it, and this is the same whether it's of the 'brat' or 'cute' variety. A re-growing 'child' is eager for life and wants to grow up. It is satiable and responsive. It is new and moves towards a future. The other has an investment in staying regressed as a defence against 'what happened next'.

As people recover more of themselves, they face towards life more. There is a wonderful eager welcoming of life experience that appears, and it's so beautiful to behold that it makes all the hard work worthwhile. We are not talking about a penchant for happiness, but a creative openness to the fullness of life experience, its diversity and mystery. People grow towards wholeness, not homogeneity. We encourage and delight in the individuality of people.