
THE THERAPY WITHOUT WORDS

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by

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Mephistopheles is sent to carry away Marlowe's John Faustus' "body and soul": the importance of the corporeal part of the transaction escaped me until I came to identify more closely with my own body, mainly through body centred therapies such as bioenergetics, massage and dynamic meditation. As a client in the psychotherapy process I suffer from disadvantages. As a counsellor with a psychotherapy training, I am aware of many of the interpersonal strategies used by therapists to facilitate their clients' growth and development. As an intelligent and verbally articulate individual, my verbal skills can be used to hinder me from gaining the very help from therapy which they enable me to offer to my own clients. These skills of communication in a familiar context enabled me to erect massive fortifications in the defence of my ego against the power of individual therapy or the strength of the therapy group. I had to find some way to bypass my verbal skills to minimise my intellectualisation placed at the urgent service of my anxiety.

To the degree that my head had become separated from my body, I had made thinking a substitute for

the vital experience and action of encountering my reality in the here and now. The live body with its physical limits is felt by individuals as a core for the self: although my relationship to my body is unique, I found like Peter Marin (1971) something of "a gentle nihilistic dream of potency and touch, but never the hard daring and deep connectedness" necessary to survival or changing the world. Somehow I needed to reduce my words and thoughts and mobilise my energy powerfully and creatively, to reveal myself by my acts.

*There's language in her eye, her
cheek, her lip,
Nay, her foot speaks!*

Troilus and Cressida IV

But this is not merely an essay into body language, important as nonverbal communication is; it is about the confluence of mind and body. It is often thought to contrast psyche and soma and therefore to contrast emotional growth with bodily development. However, this is a fancy and not a fact.

Wilhelm Reich (Boadella, 1973) made a model of therapy emerge from Freud's great work; Reich held that "actual neurosis" was the direct

result of clemmed up libido and that the body was held in frozen emotional attitudes. Natural spontaneous movement was prohibited as dangerous, as it would allow unsafe feelings and other mental material to enter awareness with ensuing conflict. The rigidities and tensions of the body were seen as muscle armouring, armour against awareness. Alexander Lowen (1976) developed bioenergetics from Reich's earlier work; by attending to breathing, muscle tensions and the patterns of body movement, Lowen showed us more clearly how we could relearn our body's natural movements and postures by dealing with our chronic muscle tensions; the habitual mechanical responses to life which constitute an outer ring and the body's equivalent of characterological ego defences. The human mind cannot be detracted from the nervous system of the body and its brain. Mens sana in corpore sano cannot occur when the psychological walls of the ego are buttressed and complemented by the physical armour of the body (Keleman, 1975).

My own experience of bioenergetic therapy, including specialised bioenergetic passage, in group and one-to-one work as a client is that very powerful infantile and pre-verbal events are evoked; sometimes most vivid memories of painful experiences, evidently stored as nonverbal material, were presented in my awareness. On other occasions, I experienced the release of emotional discharge without any clear verbal associations. I can recall rocking qua small child, not as if a child but as a child, and being encouraged to

develop this movement: the therapist intervened physically to apply pressure to my musculature which resulted in my crying and curling up, not from pain inflicted but from pain inside which had found a way out. This acting into early life has been similarly applied to the trauma of the birth process itself with its associated changes in breathing and the constriction and release of pressure on the baby.

Perhaps physical pressure is experienced as love, if not excessive and the pressure applied by the therapist could be seen as an expression of his care. (Winnicott, 1958)

In some of my body therapy sessions, I made revaluations of my self - the equivalent of the cognitive-affective changes possible in conventional psychotherapy - which seemed to me to be at a deep level of experience. I began to see emotions as a bodily recognition of feeling, not merely as an elaboration of feeling. Body therapy helped me to be more aware of my body, what sensations were and where they were, and also enabled me to experience the pleasurable sensations of "streaming" - sensations running through the whole body when it is free of chronic tension.

I began to realise that previously I had spent energy in attempting to fulfil **past** needs, not the needs of the present or the anticipated needs of the future. I became more able to live in the present and my experience of body therapy has led me to explore the value of other kinds of training, such as Zen, and to use massage in my own therapeutic

work. The significance of touching and being touched is a question frequently raised by counsellors; it was my experience that being held by the therapist and other group members aided the recall and reworking of infantile material, whilst at the same time kept me in touch with the present so that I was able to evaluate the recalled material as well as to experience it and its associated affect. The

sensitive therapist is able to help the client maintain a balance of attention between the past and the present.

If we refocus on the body rather than the mind, we can begin to see that mind is sometimes an elaboration, albeit an imaginative elaboration, of the parts, feelings and functions of the body, in fact of physical aliveness.

References

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