

Centre Profile

Energy Stream

Nick Totton and Em Edmondson

As an association of independent therapists, Energy Stream doesn't have a 'party line', so what follows is an attempted description of how we work, rather than a prescription. However, what we do all share in common is a training. That training is constantly recreated and does, we hope, offer a clear model of therapy. Probably most of us in Energy Stream have our own 'add-on' techniques and ideas; some of us have come to see Reichian therapy within a larger context of one sort or another. But we maintain a commitment to a particular world-view (those who don't, move away). It is this world-view which we will try to describe.

Central to it is the experience of life energy. Under whatever name, life energy is the perception that something moves — in us, through us, becoming us, us becoming . . . Life energy is not so much a theory, more a way of life. Life energy is good stuff, not in the sense of good v bad, but more that when we use words like 'good', 'pleasure', 'holy', 'right', we are talking about how it feels to let energy flow and



move in us. Energy seeks expression and contact; that is what love is, and the experience of that is feeling good. It follows from this that human beings are good at the core; that life is not intrinsically intolerable; that everything is, or could be, OK.

Any world-view that starts out from this place has to explain, or at least describe, how it is we don't live like that: why life often seems terrible, why people are so cruel and alien to each other, why words like 'holy' and 'right' are often used to describe the suppression and deformation of life energy and its impulses. We aren't able to explain 'how it all went wrong', but we can describe how it goes wrong for each individual bundle of energy that incarnates and gets born human. Like any organism, a human baby responds to its environment; beginning by reaching out for love and

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pleasure, but quickly learning to defend its existence if the outside world is hostile. And for most of us, the outside world — other people — is almost unimaginably hostile: our healthy impulses are met to a greater or lesser extent with rejection, coldness, fear, anger, incomprehension.

So any of us who have grown up have succeeded. With incredible competence and courage we have created a shell of defence around our soft, warm, pink insides. This process has happened, just as everything else happens, on a unified bodymind level. One of Energy Stream's fundamental positions is that 'body' and 'mind' are only different aspects of the same single process of being human, which can express itself at different moments as thought, energy, feeling, sensation.

Our defences, then, are bodymind defences: generally, they can be understood as processes of rigidification — in Reich's terminology, armouring. In self-defence, we learn to control and suppress our impulses — to clamp down on the expression of feeling, and indeed on the experience of feeling. Since feeling happens in 'body' and 'mind' simultaneously, we end up with a limited, impoverished, unspontaneous structure which is both mental and physical, manifesting in shortened muscles and immobilised connective tissue as much as in rigid attitudes and narrow emotional range. Just as a plant adapts to the desert, we have adapted to the emotional desert in which we find ourselves.

Desert plants are enormously beautiful in their adaptation, and so are we. But unlike a cactus, it is not possible for us to express the full scope of our potential for

life, our possible lovingness and creativity, within the restrictions of what Reich called our 'character armour'. Also, unexpressed feelings of rage and frustration tend to become sour, stagnant and sadistic, dangerous to ourselves and others. The process of Reichian therapy as Energy Stream understands it is one of coming to recognise our own defensive structure; of celebrating it as a marvellous survival achievement; and of reassessing whether, as adult survivors, we are able and willing to open up more possibilities for the free flow of life energy.

One of the therapist's best tools in facilitating this process is a complex and subtle system for understanding character armour. There are many different ways of looking at different character styles; a great strength of the Reichian viewpoint is that it links character to development. In the psychoanalytic tradition, it sees a set of character 'options' each of which is tied to a particular developmental threshold at which the individual experienced difficulty. We clearly cannot lay out this whole system here; but we identify five primary character positions, each of which expresses itself in particular bodily, mental, emotional and energetic styles.

The Boundary position, linked to life before, during and soon after birth, centres on the theme of existence, the right to be. The Oral position, linked to feeding, weaning and related issues, centres on the theme of need and independence, the right to be supported in growing. The Holding position, linked to toilet training, feeding and management, centres on the theme of control, the right to value myself and take my time. The Thrusting position, linked to individuation and the clash with



authority, centres on the theme of assertion, the right to be noticed and to take up space. And the Crisis position, linked to the confrontation with gender roles and with sexuality, centres on the theme of contact, the right to choose when and how I make contact, the right to play.

This gives but scant impression of the complexity of individual structure, but it is important to be clear that all of us express each character position at different moments, having crossed each developmental threshold on the path of growing up. Each of these character attitudes has its creative side: we all need to be, think, feed, enjoy, hold on, take our time, assert, reach out and open up. But, as well, each character position can become a trap, a corner we paint ourselves into because it was the only option at the time. Through understanding where we are, and its positive source, we can find our way out into a wider, freer, richer landscape.

As we have said, life energy seeks contact above all else, and the therapist's

work is always with contact. Our struggle as therapists matches the struggle of the client, always returning to and trying to deepen our contact with our own energy and process, our willingness to be in contact with the other person's energy and process. It is through offering contact that we challenge the client to recognise their own defences, and to make new choices. So all the time, as therapists, we are coming up against our own defences, our own avoidance of feeling. Through keeping our struggle open, making it available as material in the therapeutic relationship, we can facilitate the client's struggle to be alive, here, with us.

What we are describing here is well-known as 'working with transference and counter-transference'; it demonstrates the analytic roots of our work. But it is a particular style of transference work, focused much more on meeting than on withholding, and using presence rather than a 'blank screen' approach as a way to discover projections.

This style of transference work parallels the strong emphasis in Energy Stream on working directly with the body. As we have said, we understand human beings as a unified bodymind; at different points, and for different character structures, it will make sense to work in the channel of thoughts and words, of feelings, of energy, or of bodily experience. We are always very conscious of the information that a client's body style, posture, movement and so on are conveying, and sometimes we will focus directly on this, using breath in particular as a way to amplify bodily sensation and impulse. Breath is such an extraordinary, powerful tool for therapy. It acts as a bridge between control and

spontaneity, between conscious and unconscious process, between 'holding on' and 'letting go'. By tracking and focusing on our breath we immediately enter an altered state of consciousness; letting our breath deepen and flow, we bring more energy to our whole process, amplifying both our impulses for expression and the blocks against expression that constitute our armouring. In therapy we can use movement, touch, pressure and voice to help energy move through the bodymind.

Bodywork in the context of therapy is a powerful tool that needs careful and appropriate use. Techniques that might be easily handled if treated only as a physical workout can be explosive and scary in a therapy session where defences are lowered. Bodywork involves close contact and profound vulnerability; it is only appropriate for some people at some times. We emphasise it here mainly because it marks one way in which Energy Stream therapy is different from many other forms of work.

Really, our therapeutic work is about offering contact and following the flow of life energy wherever it tries to go, offering appropriate help, support and interpretation. To this end, we use all sorts of techniques, taken magpie-like from a range of different therapies, mostly humanistic or growth-movement in their orientation. We don't use them as a random ragbag, though, but in the service of a coherent view of human beings, and of the Nature of which we are part.

This world-view, rather than specific techniques, is what makes our work 'Reichian'. It also means that we don't see therapy as a way of fixing people up. In its deepest implications, it is a political and a spiritual practice, an initiative for helping us all move towards a world in which this process of defensive crippling doesn't have to happen any more, in which our central wholesomeness is able to flourish, in which everything finally 'can be, not easy and 'nice' but deeply OK.

A Brief Idiosyncratic History of Energy Stream

William West

In early 1981 I was approached by a number of people who were enjoying my groups and individual Reichian therapy sessions with enquiries about training. I referred these people to my Reichian teacher, Peter Jones. When I mentioned these latest enquirers to my supervisor Bill Walton he casually asked of me, 'If you

were to imagine you were putting together a Reichian training what would it include?'

This seemed like a fun supervision exercise so equally casually I outlined my ideas of what such a training needed to cover. You can guess the rest. About eight months later I found myself in a room

with 11 people sitting round in a circle waiting for me to begin training them. Fortunately I had backed myself up with some good trainers to help out and to fill out some of my gaps. These trainers included Peter Jones, John Southgate and Freda Copley.

I also managed to attract a high standard of trainees, a number of whom are now very well established in the therapy world in the North of England and further afield. At least four of them are now involved in giving other trainings covering postural integration, hakomi, self-heal, and massage.

Having run one course, the natural step was to put on another training. This time I made use of some of the developing talents from the first course to assist me, but continued to use more experienced trainers like John Southgate.

Some of the trainees from the first course continued to meet with me after their year of group supervision was complete, as a sort of peer supervision group. Out of this group also emerged a shared mailing list, the name of Energy Stream, and a logo. This name, I think, came from Nick Totton, and was used alongside, and then in place of, my preferred name: The Post-Reichian Therapy Association.

At the end of the first part of the second training we called a meeting of all trained people for 7 January 1984. At this meeting Energy Stream was formally established and within the wider group a smaller group of practitioners was established. This practitioner group soon became the driving force of Energy Stream and eventually took formal control of the training course and began a process that resulted in a supervision code, a code of

professional practice, a contingency fund for clients in crisis lacking funds for treatment (which has since been enlarged and incorporated into an Energy Stream Charitable Trust), self and peer assessment, and so on.

Early on in its life Energy Stream seemed to choose not to copy the structures of existing (psycho)therapy groups but to develop its own version in keeping with its sense of a Reichian approach to organisation. We thus sought to create structures that permitted energy to flow rather than repressed life within the group through a rigid bureaucracy.

Our meetings as a result have at times been painful and bruising but they have rarely been dull and unimaginative. This need to initiate and develop our own structures has given us extra work to do. At times arguing over a form of wording about codes of conduct or supervision I have longed to take a model off the shelf and just use it! However, this invention process has made the structures ours and uniquely open to development and improvement in the light of changes within us and the world outside.

Decision-making is done by our quarterly practitioner group meetings, chaired in turn by our members, and is largely done by consensus. If there is a big divide in the group on a crucial issue we will often put off the decision until the next meeting to take more time to consider. Much preparation work is done by small sub-committees, informal groups and individuals, all of whom are likely to circulate members in advance of meetings with papers on appropriate topics.

Attendance at our quarterly meetings is variable, though our meetings are usu-

ally quorate in a group with a wide geographical spread of members ranging from Scotland to Dorset. This probably reflects members desire to meet together for mutual support as well as a commitment to our work organisation. We encourage this attendance by having a fares pool, rotating the venue and chair of our meetings, and by insisting on at least one attendance every year.

One factor that has made continued membership difficult is having a group where ex-trainees and trainers, ex-therapists, current therapists and clients, as well as those in supervision, come together. The transference issues makes the mind boggle. Also sub-groups of people from different trainings have to meet and work together. Many of us have sought therapy and supervision outside of the group to reduce this. I wonder how other groups deal with this?

Over 65 people have successfully completed our training courses, numbering five so far, with a sixth in its final year. At present there are fifteen active practitioner members of Energy Stream. There are many more drawing on their training either as part of their psychotherapy practices or in many and varied ways including: work around HIV and AIDS; social work; men's rituals; and one person who draws on the training in management in bank computing! Reichian insight into people and processes has potentially wide applications.

As a group we have always maintained contacts with the wider therapy, healing, and alternative medicine worlds, with a creative exchange of ideas and energies occurring. Consequently we have been affected over the years by the wider

concerns they have developed for practitioners. For instance, deeper appreciation of issues of abuse — working with it therapeutically in relation to the client's past but also understanding the potential of abuse by therapists of clients.

Our contact with UKCP has caused us to examine our structures and training and further focussed our minds on accreditation issues, encouraging us to put into words an intuitive grasp of a client and their process, or a potential trainee's readiness for training. It has challenged us to clarify where we stand, including looking at our reluctance to place high value on our would-be trainees' essays and degrees. (This does not mean we don't look for signs of cognitive ability, rather that we are aware of how damaging conventional education can be; our Reichian hearts lie with Summerhill and a student-centred approach to learning and training.)



It is hard to capture the spirit and history of Energy Stream on paper. It changes and develops over the years, and myths arise. In the end I always return to a sense of those uninvited guests at any meeting of therapy practitioners — the clients. Sometimes at a difficult meeting I console myself with the thought of the

dozens of clients represented through our members and realise that is what is important — therapy work and the quality of what is offered, not whether Frank and Sylvia can agree on a sub-clause. The real value of Energy Stream is the work done by our clients.

A Training with Energy Stream

Robert Cumming

Our training was two years, part-time. It comprised three 5-day residentials at Laurieston Hall in southwest Scotland, plus monthly weekends in Leeds. The course included direct teaching, a lot of experiential (and experimental) work, exercises and demonstrations on each other and in the group as a whole, and monthly individual supervision throughout. We had to take personal therapy throughout, and had the chance to take on practice clients during the final six months. The aim was to prepare us to offer Reichian therapy to individuals and groups, for those of us who want to. Deciding whether or not to practise was part of the process. We were assessed at the end of the first year by the Training Committee, causing a hint of paranoia in some of us, and at the end of the course by the Committee and by our peers.

For much of the time in the group we worked in pairs or (often) in threes, one person observing and commenting after each session. We had no limit set on the material we could bring to the practice sessions, but William West, who anchored

the training, said from the outset that we should be prepared to come out of our own material to attend to talks, demonstrations, etc. Where someone — or the group — was into something intense then the facilitator who was with us would usually work with it. This showed something of each trainer's style of working, and I found these models very useful.

Before the training I had swapped many bodywork sessions in residentials and self-help groups, but it felt different to be doing this on the training. I was a lot more self-conscious and inept as I tried out thinking of myself as a therapist, instead of treating the whole thing as a lark.

The three residentials felt like the articulation points of the training; the weekends I often found more mundane. The opening residential was a chance to get to know each other, run through some of the things which we would go over in more detail at later dates, and start considering what a session of Reichian therapy might involve. Work in the open group also got under way, and we started to find out who had decided to be a light-

ning-rod, who was honest and clear (therefore enviable), who was just plain frightening, and so on.

There were exercises around projection, and exploring Reich's segments — the sections of the body where chronic tensions tend to stick. These involved moving and exploring for ourselves what each one felt like. Watching William demonstrate, I realised what a horrendous number of choices about how to proceed occur in each session. Good news — it's impossible to conduct a perfect session, so don't try. Bad news — it's possible to get thoroughly lost, which I did, frequently.

That residential ended with a terrific party, featuring a refreshing series of male v female wrestling matches.

A theme which was developed over the next few weekends was contact between therapist and client. Bodywork can be very challenging so developing that intuition which tells you whether a client is really 'there', not split off from you, acquiescent, is essential, and becomes a main part of the work with very fragile people.

On the second residential we looked at birthing — the techniques are very similar to traditional 'lie down and breathe' bodywork sessions — and considered the primal therapists' map of development. I was able to recognise that I had some rather frightening business to do around my birth; there was practically no contact between me and my surrogate mother.

Also on this residential there was a lot of stormy open groupwork, billed (after it started) as a necessary unsticking of relationships within the group and between trainees and facilitators. I remember that — I did not have a central part in any of the really heavy stuff, but the fear I

experienced just watching it made me question whether it was well handled. This experience was a big step towards my recognising a rather cowed inner self, and organising my life and practice to suit that person rather than blindly going with a brash, impulsive outer self. I hated the shocks which led me to these conclusions, but I don't think I could have reached them otherwise.

The third residential was fine-tuning and tempering us for individual practice (those who planned to), plus more gripping work for some of us in the open group. We used visualisations to find symbols or 'helpers' to guide our work: this was powerful for me, as I 'found' an old man who un-nailed me from a cross. This was accompanied by mild embarrassment on my part. I felt silly to have been to have been up there in the first place. We video-taped some individual sessions for discussion afterwards, and taped the excellent party at the end of the week. I have no urgent need to see it.

The experiential emphasis of the training seemed to have pros and cons. I was engaged, sometimes a little too much, in the group's life. Personal experience, and personal ideas and feelings brought up by the process of learning and the group's process, could always be expressed and explored. I would have liked more chances to chew over theory. I did a lot of this in supervision, but small groups and seminars would have been useful. I moaned about this. Since then I have met a lot of people from other trainings who found other things to moan about, including lack of experiential involvement.

I often used up my energy in the group agonising over whether to say something

and deciding not to. This is, as William would say, 'in character'. Each person's character is the preferred style in which we meet the world, and we demonstrate it in the way we look, the way we talk, what we expect from the world. Reich's original work on character led him in to bodywork; essentially working with character is Reich's way of working with process rather than content, nonverbal rather than verbal communication. Most Reichian groupings develop lists of character 'types'. We looked at the character positions each one of us tended to occupy (painful), and with the help of pictures provided by Nick Totton we considered Kylie Minogue, Donald Duck, and many other celebrities. That was fun.

I used my monthly supervision sessions (with Em Edmondson) to talk through anything or everything which came up for me from the training process. The work Em and I did was some of the best work in the whole training — focusing repeatedly on what therapy was, and taking an overview of my own process in and around the group.

So what was the training really like? I can remember the parties and innumerable meals and conversations with friends on the course. Also lonely (sometimes) walks in the woods at Laurieston, and lovely frosty mornings in grimy Leeds. Lots of vivid memories. My 'natural' way of remembering the course seems to cast it not as a piece of formal education but as an introduction to a way of life — both profane and spiritual, passionate and sceptical. The two years of permission to be intense with people was a very special experience. I can also very easily remember (in character) a lot of putdowns,

frights, painful false assumptions about people. By the end of the training these hurts and the entanglement of the group — we were in effect practising repeatedly on people known to us, asking for trouble — I was knackered, happy to finish.

It ended with us devising personal rituals to receive our diplomas. Mine was exceedingly simple. In retrospect that was a missed opportunity, hurrying away like a small boy who knew it all instead of making a ritual space and getting noticed.

In the year after the training I became thoroughly dispirited. I can see now that I was grieving the loss of the group. It's only recently that I've become seriously involved in the Practitioners' Group. This may be some sort of substitution of one group and its activities for the other one. It feels like growing up, the struggle to establish myself having been an integral part of 'training'. I have had to accept that some of the changes I need to make run at a very slow pace, taking more than a year, perhaps many years.

Parallel to the process of leaving, grieving, and setting up a life with Reichian therapy 'in it', there has been another slow process involving negative feelings towards the trainers who worked with us and some of the trainees. This was never ruinous of any relationship I had with them (as far as I was concerned — I was horrible to one or two of them) but it caused me a lot of misery and discomfort. Transference is part of it. Recently I have been pleased to notice that it has gone off without much effort on my part. An example of benign unconscious activity, perhaps. It may have been helped by living three hundred miles away from anyone who might want me to deal with it.