

# Surfing the Field: An Exploration of Energetic Communication in Therapy

Audrey Wilson

I am not a surfer. I'm not even a particularly strong swimmer. But I can remember watching a surfing championship taking place in Hawaii and being fascinated by the surfers. It wasn't the physiques that caught my attention. Rather, it was the fact that even when it seemed clear that a surfer had attained balance on top of the phenomenally impossible surface of a moving, curling wave, they weren't still. They weren't still and they weren't at rest. A surfer's balance isn't always a tenuous thing, but it is always dynamic. There are repeated small movements to the left, to the right, backwards and forwards, up and down, and every possible combination in between. Surfers don't fight the water, they don't try to tame it, they don't restrain it. They learn to ride the waves. To roll with them, to become a part of the wave, and to let the power of flow of the ocean move them where they want to go.

*Surfing expresses...a pure yearning for visceral, physical contact with the natural world. Matt Warshaw  
Maverick's: The Story of Big Wave Surfing*

This article isn't about surfing exactly - this is Self & Society after all - but it is about becoming aware of how much we yearn to connect and to have contact with the natural world of our experiences, and about the consequences of that. This natural world exists in the winds of our thoughts and memories and the watery movements of our emotions and feelings. This natural world is what calls the therapist and counsellor to their chair. It calls the client too. This natural world is what human beings live for. Contact, communication, connection; the need to be understood, validated, accepted. As therapists, as counsellors, we understand these needs. Hopefully we understand and accept

them in ourselves and therefore model them for our clients. However, the relationship between therapist and client is more than active listening, well used phrases such as, 'can you say a bit more about that?', or well timed mirroring. It is more than all the bags of skills and gifts that a therapist can bring to the aid of a client already committed to their growth and health. It is more than the humanity of 'two scared people sitting together in a room'.

I encountered the concept of the 'synergetic field' (or interactive or interactional fields) while doing my counselling training. The idea of a field of energy including both client's and therapist's conscious and unconscious thoughts and feelings, personal histories and Jung's 'collective unconscious', was thoroughly intriguing. Stein referred to the field as a 'pattern of energy flow that affects objects in its domain (Stein, 1995, p72.). So rather than an image of the field being a dumping ground for both client and therapist, I viewed the field as a...moving, breathing, energy mass, both created by and encompassing the creators. And therefore I began to understand that the 'third' created by the client and counsellor is bigger than the space in between, the whole being bigger than the sum of its parts.

I understood transference and countertransference. I recognised when I had been 'infected', as Jung said, by a client and when my wound was being re-activated by the work with a particular client. I was as conscious as I could be, and when that wasn't 'good enough', and even when it was, I had my supervisors to lean against. This

worked well, with the exception of the fact that within the first year of working with clients I began to notice the continued occurrence of what appeared to be 'parallel process'.

In a nutshell parallel process points to a particular type of transference and countertransference. Much of the academic writing on parallel process is centred around supervision, so for example, a counsellor may begin to relate to their supervisor in the same manner that their client relates to them. Or in terms of countertransference, the supervisor may begin to behave with the counsellor, as the counsellor does with their client. This I find fairly straightforward, if sometimes uncomfortable. And as with all transference and countertransference, I find that if I can remain open to it, I can become privy to often invaluable information about the client's life and relationships.

The 'parallel process' I was experiencing however (and this was the only term I came up with at the time to express what I could barely explain) was of a different nature. I became aware that as I dealt with a particular issue in my own life, some or all of my clients would bring that issue into our sessions.

In my second year of training, I began to deal with a challenging sibling relationship in my own life, utilizing a depth and breadth of courage that I had previously lacked. Some weeks after my 'sibling showdown', I found two of my clients (on the same day) speaking of clearing up issues

with their siblings that they had never mentioned before in our sessions. I noted this occurrence in supervision, called it a sort of parallel process and didn't think much of it until it happened again. And again. And again. And again and again and again. The phenomenon kept my attention because the similarities between my clients' and my own respective situations got stronger, to the point where I may have used a particular phrase (or had someone in my life use it to me) and come into a session with a client whereupon they detailed a similar occurrence and used the same language. It was uncanny. Particularly because the 'lag time' as I called it, the time between which I made a 'breakthrough' in my life and my client expressed the same breakthrough, became shorter and shorter.

One particular weekend during my final year training we had a therapist specialising in sexuality come to speak at my training centre. One of this trainer's most memorable phrases was about being ...'taken' (frankly not quite the word he used) 'on the bonnet of a car.' It was an enlightening weekend during which my awareness of my own sexual wounding deepened. On Tuesday when I saw my clients (the Tuesday following the Sunday of the workshop) all four of my clients, including two clients of whom NEVER previously discussed sex, came in, sat themselves down on the chair opposite mine and discussed their relationship to sex, their relationships to sex and their partners, their sexual

woundings, etc. Indeed one of my clients, upon telling me about his masturbatory experiences and that he loved his partner said he just wished he could be...and then went silent for a minute. I then countered with, 'taken' on the bonnet of a car?' To which he lit up, clapped his hands and yelled, 'Exactly. Exactly.' And then spoke about his fantasy man. For quite some time. He felt absolutely liberated.

After this day of non-stop sexual content with my clients I could hardly ignore the reality that something was happening between myself and my clients. The field that I had previously thought of as simply existing between the two chairs, within the therapy room, was much much bigger than I had imagined. And didn't parallel process appear to be pointing to the therapist picking up something from the client, and not the other way around?

At first I could be heard touting that phrase about a therapist only being able to accompany their client where they themselves have gone. But I grew uncomfortable with that after seeing my clients exhibit courage in ways that I could not imagine. Or survive things that I know very little about first hand. I recognise that if for example, as a counsellor you are not comfortable with say sexuality, or issues of race or whatever it may be, it is less likely you will get a client opening up to you about those issues. As a counsellor, our unresolved mysteries, denials, and 'no go' areas are just as visible under the cover of the field as our clients' are. So that might have been the case. Perhaps my clients could feel my own

insecurity or tentativeness about a particular subject in some cases, and on some level were waiting for me to be open or comfortable enough to respond to them and their issues in those realms. I certainly would not rule that out, however, it is unlikely to explain each and every example of this phenomenon.

Outside of the therapeutic relationship and the therapy room, I had always been a strong emitter and receiver of energy. In my life before becoming a therapist, I had noted how it was possible for a lecturer to inspire her occasionally limp and lazy students to sit up, sometimes on the edges of their seats, and use their voices, allow their opinion to count. I noticed how affected I could be from films or books or crowds. I noticed how one person in a queue could be rude to an already overworked cashier, and how that cashier could turn around and be short with the next person in the queue who then felt unjustly persecuted. I often wondered as I watched the shoppers leave, whether they would drive safely or slam the doors of their cars, getting their coats stuck and fueling more of their foul temper. I wondered whether they took it home to their spouses, to their children.

*To develop a complete mind, study the science of art, study the art of science. Learn how to see. Realize that everything connects to everything else. Leonardo da Vinci*

And so we return to surfing... Surfers don't fight the water, they don't try to tame it, they don't restrain it. They learn to ride the

waves. To roll with them, to become a part of the wave, and to let the power or flow of the ocean, move them to where they want to go...A surfer who isn't connected to the water probably spends most of the time spitting out water and getting up on their board. It may be that the surfer recognises, consciously or not, that they are a part of that nature with which they long to connect. That the ninety odd percent of water in their bodies is similar enough to that which could potentially buffet their bodies on the rocks, or sweep it under the wave, to speak the same language. That their bones, muscles, organs, skin, are somehow connected to that undulating awesome power.

What I am beginning to understand is that in the therapy room, as in life, everything really is connected. This is something we as a planet have come to understand. We have learned that our actions leave carbon footprints, and like environmental detectives we are beginning to track back to learn more and more about what we have done, in the hopes of learning what we can do differently. Quantum physicists tell us that while we see our bodies as solid, under a powerful enough microscope we would see a mass of vibrating energy. And so, the cry of 'everything is connected' is no longer the message of the new age hippie, it is simply, fact. *And it is something that healers know.* It is something that surfers know. But I am not certain that either the academic literature, contemporary theory on counselling and psychotherapy, or most trainings acknowledge.

I am not sure it is 'known' in our field. And I believe this is at best, an oversight and at its worst, a potential harm.

Counselling and psychotherapy, the offspring of analysis, have developed their own discipline, language and way of being, though in all, the therapists understanding for the need of strong boundaries is paramount. These boundaries protect both counsellor and client, and are one of the basic building blocks of a solid therapeutic relationship. Without a container that holds, both therapist and client rest on shifting sands.

How then to see this synchronistic process? Perhaps someone out there knows the name for it (and if you do please for goodness sake let me know), but I think the fact that I can not even begin to develop a phrase for it says something of the lack, and fear that our therapeutic disciplines have for such a phenomenon. Symbiosis - oh no, that often suggests something unhealthy...synchronicity - well, Jung wasn't really speaking of this was he?...parallel process as I called it in the beginning, well we have been through that one...even the more obscure characterisations around transference and countertransference don't really apply, for example Jung's participation mystique, his term for the relationship between the therapist's and client's unconscious. It isn't clearly evident that this phenomenon is actually transference or countertransference at all.

And frankly it is a valid to ask the question, 'so what?'. So what

if a therapist solves a puzzle on the Monday only to have their client speak about solving it, or going out to buy it, on Tuesday. What does it matter anyway? Truthfully, I am not sure the specifics are the first thing that matters. Whether all my clients started speaking about sex on the same day, whether both my client and I decided to move in the same week, or whether two of my clients decided to go out a buy house plants for the first time two days after I did, is not the point. Those specifics make anecdotal stories, not much else. But the implications are vast. If the field of communicated thoughts and feelings exists, and the knowledge that we are made up of vibrating energy exists, how do we best do the work? How do we use this energy? How are we used by this energy?

*When one tugs a single thing in nature, we find ourselves attached to the whole world.*  
John Muir

At this point I have more questions than answers. I am still in the enquiry, still in the process of recognising that I am a part of this nature, this moving, creating, information filled energy and for the moment, being conscious of this and reminding myself of it, is the extent to which I have gone. I believe the acknowledgment is key. Because like the surfer focused on taming the waves, becoming their master, (we could probably call this individual a faller rather than a surfer), I think it can be within the ken of the psychotherapist to foolishly and egotistically think that we always need to control the flow or the nature of communication

between our clients and ourselves. Guide the session, sensitively and intuitively probe, and determinedly block personal questions for the protection of our clients and ourselves. But what if the client potentially has access to all of us, and us to them? (Keep breathing, in and out, in and out). What if, energetically, a client will unconsciously receive information about his therapist that will help him to heal? Not Mystic Meg information, 'you have a sister named Betty and had a dog with three legs when you were a child...' but information in the form of emotion, 'I want a visible way of nurturing myself, I want a mirror in my home that illustrates how I am doing on my journey...I think I'll buy a plant.' There is a vast difference here. What if our clients are privy to our beingness, our ability to have joy, or our routine slide into self criticism? What if every time we break through some emotional barrier that held us back, the force of the energy expelled by that breakthrough ripples through our entire client list?

While we know that changes in our personal lives undoubtedly have an impact on those that know us, those who can see the change in us, those who watch our clothes change or our hair get cut or whatever. And yes, when our hair and clothes change and we bring those changes to our sessions, our clients are very aware of them. In my experience, aware, curious, and sometimes slightly obsessive. And those kinds of responses are par for the course in traditional psychotherapeutic or analytic literature, which is what makes

this synchronistic/ parallel phenomenon so fascinating. It isn't about hair changes or clothes changes or the fact that where you once wore a ring you do not have one any more. These communiqués are subtle, nuanced, and importantly - healing.

Rather than the usual call for research, I would like to call for two things, others' experiences regarding this phenomenon, as I do not for one moment imagine I am alone in this. And secondly, a growing awareness in the reality of our connectivity. My ever wise supervisor recently told me, 'Audrey, allow the practical to take care of itself and keep your focus on the energy of the situation.' She was reminding me that I had the basics in place, in this particular therapeutic relationship, sessions were starting and ending on time, I was warning my client that the session would be ending, I was listening and mirroring, I occasionally probed, the alliance was strong, and so on. This particular client was content heavy and at times I could be caught in the net of that heavy content. The communication that was taking place energetically required a different kind of attention, and required me, not to ignore the content, but to place my attention elsewhere. My supervisor was using my language to invite me to alter the level of my gaze. While this kind of movement of the therapeutic gaze is commonplace within therapy, I think the basic tenet is just as useful in the explication of this phenomena. I think this is the point.

We no longer live in a world where conscious and unconscious thought are the entire picture. With the trickling down of quantum physics, the virtual establishment of energy medicines and the like, we as counsellors and psychotherapists have a duty to broaden our gaze, our awareness. If indeed our clients are able to receive energetic communications, not created specifically for them, but created out of our own growth, we have a responsibility to at the very least to recognise that our growth (and perhaps our stagnation) may effect our clients, just as we take it for granted that our clients' growth and/or stagnation has an impact on us.

If all is connected and all is energy, then the same force that allows a surfer to roll with a wave can wash away towns and tear down houses. And the same force that allows for the transfer of energy in the form of transference or counter-transference between therapist and client, or parallel process between supervisee and supervisor, can create a jewel of an emotion in your life and also drop it in your client's pocket.

*Only through our connectedness with each other can we truly know and enhance the self. And only through working on the self can we truly enhance our connectedness with others.*  
Harriet Goldhur Lerner

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Eric Whitton died in August. He was a central member of the humanistic movement in the UK.

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