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## **Therapeutic Presence in Holistic Psychotherapy**

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### **Preface**

As the son of one of the founders of the expressive therapy movement, I learned a tremendous amount about therapy around the dinner table and during long walks in the country. It is a rare privilege to have my father also be one of my most significant professional mentors. He has always had a playful, rabbinical way of engaging his children in intellectual combat. While we wrestled with him, our ideas and identities were forged in a particular kind of family crucible that had elements of mental discipline, intuitive wisdom and creative fierceness. I always knew that I could bring my creative or intellectual endeavors to the fire of his mind for an opinion. My relationship with him has given me the opportunity to learn the art of psychotherapy within a circle of love which has left indelible imprints on my theoretical understanding as well as my personal style and aesthetic approach to therapy. As I grew older, to my surprise and delight, our process would often be reversed when he would ask for my input on his artistic projects, some aspect of transpersonal or body oriented psychotherapy or simply use me as a sounding board for his latest brainstorm. As I approach the age of forty, with a family of my own and a successful career, there is something poignant about writing a chapter for a book which he is editing. The circle completes itself, the dialogue continues, our relationship is different and yet it is the same.

### **Introduction**

As the field of psychotherapy moves into the twenty-first century, there is a greater awareness that all the dimensions of our lives are inextricably inter-related. It is becoming increasingly impossible to treat someone psychologically without also taking into account their physical and spiritual well being. Like the eastern proverb of the blind men each describing different parts of an elephant

and believing they were touching different creatures, we are coming to the common sense realization that as practitioners specializing in one area of healing or another, we all have our hands on the same animal. All the systems of a human being exist as a functional unity. Furthermore, developing scientific paradigms indicate that change at any level has reverberations that echo from the molecular to the cosmic levels in a great chain of being. Perhaps if our sensitivities were developed highly enough we would realize that it is life itself that we touch every time we make an intervention as a healer.

Throughout human history, creative people have been the transformational, healing agents of society. One can infer from this that the therapist who has an intimate knowledge of the creative process is uniquely qualified to guide clients in a process of authentic regeneration. When this regeneration is complete the therapeutic artist has touched his client on many levels and often worked in several different modalities. If an expressive therapist can facilitate a person in reconnecting with his or her creativity and consult to the process of formulating lively and strong containers for vitality and self-expressiveness in body, mind, and spirit simultaneously the process of healing may progress with a synergistic complexity and integrity.

### **An Integrative, Eclectic Approach**

Every therapeutic encounter is a work of art. All clients and therapists are works in progress. In the artistic process there are no rigid dogmatic rules which one can apply unilaterally. Similarly, in therapy, the seasoned therapeutic artist lets go of preconceptions and attends to the healing muse. In this way he develops a disciplined attunement to the rhythms and timing of the therapeutic process. The voice of this healing muse can be grounded in certain therapeutic principles and felt in the different listening perspectives which are appropriate to the specific

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A note about pronouns: Throughout this article, in most cases, I have used the masculine pronoun for simplicity and style. It is to be understood that this usage is inclusive of the feminine.

developmental issues which the client is working through (Hedges, 1991). Each practitioner hears this voice through the filter of his own emotional development and responds relative to the psychological defenses he has been able to modify and master.

In learning the art of therapy, practitioners must constantly be sensitive to a multitude of contexts. An intervention which succeeds marvelously in one session will fall flat in the next. Like a well trained dancer or Tai Chi practitioner the stance of an expressive therapist strikes a balance between structure and spontaneity, theory and the lively encounter of the moment. He must learn to keep his boundaries open and permeable between the apprehensive and intuitive world of feelings and empathic presence and the comprehensive,

analytic world of theoretical perspectives which informs and contains his instinctual sense of things.

Each practitioner has certain limitations which they bring to the therapeutic encounter. These are the 'facts' of the therapist's life, and include such obvious things as gender, age, socioeconomic, ethnic and religious background. Less obvious, but equally important are the therapist's beliefs spiritual practice or lack of one, sense of morality and values, and the way they organize and make meaning of experience. All of these 'facts' have a vital impact on how the work proceeds. Every therapist is also a field of possibilities, a mysterious and spontaneous movement into the unknown. In this way, the therapist and client share in the existential tension of the lives into which they have been thrown and the formless emptiness from which all acts of creativity and renewal emerge. This is the ground zero of the therapeutic encounter. When healing occurs, both participants have learned to balance the known and the unknown and engaged in a process which has skillfully provided the client access to the forces which transpire behind that which appears.

As the therapeutic container is able to bear the anxiety which we all face when confronted with the unfamiliar it is also building an even deeper capacity to hold the awesome power of the life force. This life force by its very nature is an indefinable, fathomless field of limitless vitality and possibilities. The confrontation with the life force must inevitably be titrated over time. In this process the therapeutic dyad or group adventures out into the particular field of possibilities which are available to it at any given moment and begins to notice differences between the repetitive loops of what it already knows how to do and the edge of the unknown where there is the possibility to learn something new. In short, a productive therapeutic process helps clients to develop a more complex, rich and differentiated experience of self, other and the environment through a series of developmental steps.

In productive therapy there has been a successful negotiation between the subjective worlds of the client and therapist and the creative essence of all things. A well crafted healing environment invites these three forces into a dance. The art of the therapist is to be able to skillfully maneuver inside of this container and to develop a bone deep knowledge of when to push, when to step back, the timing of confrontation and support, and the ability to hold faith in the Creative Source from which healing springs.

## **The Principles**

Like all healing arts, a therapy which takes into account the body, mind and spirit of a client is guided by certain principles. These principles are applied in the context of the particular developmental issue which the client is working through.

## **Presence**

The first is the quality of *presence*. The particular, functional definition of the quality of presence which I use is the ability to contain and have access to many conflicting polarities and aspects of the self simultaneously. It is this depth of self-knowledge which allows the therapist to resonate with the client's experience energetically and provides a field of compassionate acceptance for the material which the client delivers into the therapeutic arena. The therapist who knows and has explored in his or her own therapy the experiences of sadism, masochism, dependency, lust, love, ecstasy, and terror at the edge of the unknown (to name a few) and can energetically communicate this non-verbal knowledge is well equipped to work with clients who are struggling with these issues. Presence gives us the ability to touch someone in the deepest core of where they live and ultimately may be the most effective agent to help someone overcome their stubborn resistance to change.

For many clients, it is the therapist's capacity to be deeply present with them that makes the most fundamental and lasting impact on their lives. Indeed, one of the most important outcomes of a successful healing process may be that the client develops an ability to be present and centered within him or herself in a wider range of the human experience than before they entered treatment. In other languages, one might call this the ability to contain without repression or acting out, or making the unconscious conscious. In modeling for our clients the discipline of contactful, compassionate presence to all aspects of the human experience we are teaching them one of the most subtle and sure paths to wisdom.

## **Process**

The second principle is *process*. Process means that the therapist places a fundamental value on exploring the moment to moment unfoldment of the client's experience, avoiding premature closure, explanations or interpretations. It is through the principle of process that we create a window into the spontaneous possibilities of our authentic selves.

Many writers have observed how good therapeutic process has a meditative quality. In meditation one feels into the currents of one's inner life with a progressively heightened sense of awareness. In therapy, the participants meditate the space inside and between each other. Both the inter and intrapsychic realm become the object of contemplation. In this way the participants re-potentiate themselves and the inter-personal space with the magnetism of the authentic self. If this alchemy is successful, the client emerges with a fundamentally transformed center of psychological, spiritual and physical gravity in relationship with themselves and others.

## **Authenticity**

The third principle is *authenticity*. Different than the innate, spontaneous genuineness of the child, authenticity is both an art and a developmental achievement. The genuineness of a child springs from a pure innocent well and

emerges relatively untarnished into the relational field. In the simplicity of a child's genuineness there is little or no distinction between the feeling, the impulse and the action. All of this erupts seamlessly in the hungry cry, the frustrated tantrum, the affectionate reaching, or the satisfied bliss of being held. In counterpoint to this, the authenticity of an adult is a complex relational process between being and becoming, which requires that we contain our impulses and actions while we explore our feelings. As we contain and reflect on our feelings we gather enough internal data and self knowledge to be capable of making conscious, authentic choices. In other words, we become self aware, aware of the people in our environment and our effect on them and responsible, i.e., able to respond.

In modern society, most of us suffer from some form of alienation. We might understand this as different ways in which our attention has become imbalanced. If our attention is located too far out, we chronically lose ourselves in the demands of the other. If our attention is too far in, we maintain our connection with ourselves at the high price of feelings of isolation and loneliness. Authenticity requires us to be fully awake, perched on the crest of experience, engaged in the complex dance between the inner and outer world, responsible for our choices. Like a surfer, we ride the currents, balancing our attention between the ocean swells, the distribution of our weight on the board, and our enjoyment, anxiety and curiosity about the ride. The wish to learn and practice the art of authenticity may be one of the underlying draws beyond immediate symptom relief that pulls clients into a therapeutic process. Indeed, one might easily reframe all the diagnostic categories as different forms of existential alienation from ourselves, each other, society or our natural environment.

## **The Self as Process**

The principle of authenticity leads us to the understanding that the *self is a process*, an evolving field of structure and possibility which is held together by intention. At the level of the personality, the self is not something we can ever quantify or capture like some eternal crystal. A deeply felt realization of the transience of the self can lead us into a profound experience of resolving back into the ground of creative being and possibility. This experience culminates in a realization of the emptiness or insubstantiality of the self. In spiritual practice this is often referred to as the experience of 'no self' or selflessness. It is important to note that this emptiness is the opposite of the schizoid experience of nothingness. It is shot through with the awesome magnetism of the life force. Buddhist psychology, mysticism and shamanism have a great deal to teach us about these deep stratum of experience (Epstein, 1995).

When we attune ourselves to the creative ground of being, there are certain rhythms and inner currents which we feel drawn to and which we associate with a feeling of health and psychological wellness. If we listen to our intuition we can also discern when we are in a situation which is not truly optimal for our growth and happiness. One of the most important questions we might meditate on with our clients is the discrimination between those desires or aversions which are based on our conditioning and reactivity, and those impulses which come from

an authentic connection with our inner guidance. If we are successful in living in harmony with the voice of our inner guidance and with the rhythms of this deep ground of being, we gain a progressively greater sense of mastery, centeredness, and an ability to hold both satisfaction and frustration in a creative momentum which keeps us in touch with the leading edge of our growth.

### **The Reactive Mind**

The fifth principle is what I call the principle of the *reactive mind*. This is the idea that there are forces within us which keep us on the surface of things, out of touch with the movement of the life force and with our authenticity. Some of the ways the reactive mind has been thought of are: character defenses, body armor, the repetition compulsion, behavioral conditioning, addictions of all sorts and the forces of attachment and aversion. It is useful to note here that it is the unconsciousness of the reactive mind which is most pernicious. To be sure, there are some ways in which we act out our reactivity that are so destructive that they absolutely must be stopped immediately if the therapeutic enterprise is to have even the remotest chance of success. Other defenses are more subtle and can only be made conscious and modified over a long period of therapeutic work.

In confronting the reactive mind we must always work in a developmental context and be sensitive to the function which it is serving in someone's life. Sometimes a defensive structure is maintaining a vital sense of order, coherence, or perhaps even helping someone to survive in a particularly destructive environment. These defenses need to be left alone until the client has enough centeredness to change and to confront his or her anxiety at sitting at the edge of the unknown. An observation that I have made in watching the work of a variety of master therapists is that the deeper the practitioner is able to ally with the authentic center of the client through his or her quality of presence, the more leverage is available to unseat the reactive mind. The timing and knowledge of when to confront and when to support and the deep and efficient understanding of someone's structure and possibilities is an art which ripens over time.

### **The Functional Unity of Body, Mind and Spirit**

The sixth principle is the '*functional unity*' of our physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual life. This term was originally coined by Wilhelm Reich and is the concept that underlies body oriented psychotherapy (Baker, 1980). Reich noticed that every character defense had a physical correlate in disturbances of breath, muscular tension or organ dysfunction. In a sense, he was rediscovering the holistic philosophy of such time honored and effective healing arts as acupuncture, ayurveda, yoga and homeopathy. In the past two decades there has been a literal explosion of interest, research and practice of these modalities. The deeper a therapist can understand the current thinking in regards to our mind/body connection, the more capable he will be of providing a broad and integrated container for this level of work. Providing such a container will often mean working with a network of like-minded professionals. This network can

become an exciting cooperative effort in which all participants deepen their understanding of the complex processes which cause human suffering.

### **Developmental Order**

The seventh principle is the observation that there is a *developmental order* to the ways in which we meet life's challenges. Much psychological research, phenomenological observation, and speculative thought has gone into our understanding of the different ways human beings develop or get waylaid on the path towards being a mature adult. We might conceptualize the goal of development as the ability to access both an intuitive, apprehensive, knowledge of ourselves and our environment and the cognitive ability to comprehend theoretically and analytically and to create a constantly evolving, responsive map of our experience (Agazarian, 1993). The western psychological schools of drive theory, ego psychology, self psychology and object relations have each attended to particular phases of development and provided their own unique perspective from which to listen to our clients (Pine, 1990). Transpersonal theorists such as Ken Wilber (1977) and Michael Washburn (1983) have extended these theories to include our spiritual and contemplative development. It would be a gross and damaging simplification to be wedded to any one particular school or perspective in our understanding of human development. Each client will call for a different theoretical mix to provide the appropriate container for his work. There is a great deal of conscious discernment, intuition and supervision that must go into creating this mix. Different therapists will also develop styles which are more or less appropriate for particular stages of development. Some people are more attuned to issues of longing and sadness, others excel at being able to dance with the volatile currents of hostility and conflict, while yet other therapists are uniquely suited and trained in working with the transpersonal dimension. Indeed, people who are committed to working their growing edge will probably need to work with different therapists at different stages of their life cycle or internal development. A depth of self-knowledge coupled with a theoretical breadth and sophistication can help a therapist to develop a sound, centered eclecticism and to know his talents and limitations.

There are four major approaches which have informed my practice of these principles. These are Body Oriented Psychotherapy, Spiritual Psychology, Systems Centered Therapy and the Psycho-Aesthetic approach to depth oriented treatment. Briefly I would like to touch on the basic tenets of each of these orientations.

### **Body Oriented Psychotherapy**

I began my working career as a massage therapist and healer. The training I received included Polarity therapy, Postural Integration massage, Breath work, energy field work, Neuromuscular massage and Cranio-Sacral therapy. Currently, I rarely work strictly as a massage therapist, however the lens

of body work continues to inform my therapeutic perspective and has immeasurably deepened my sensitivity to the non-verbal communications of my clients.

In working as a massage therapist, I had the visceral experience of my clients enfolded in many layers of magnetism, each of which contained information and emotional experience. I learned that it was virtually impossible to release the deeper tensions in the body without also addressing the person's emotional life and belief systems. This awareness, as well as my fascination with the complexity of the healing process, led me to enter a graduate program in counseling psychology and to study and experience explicitly body oriented psychotherapies such as bioenergetics and core energetics. As my own training in counseling deepened, I gravitated towards other therapists who also had a background in body-work and naturally developed my own synthesis. Particularly early on in my career clients would often come to me for body-work and then renegotiate their contract to include psychotherapy.

The major goals of Body Oriented Psychotherapy as I've experienced it are:

- 1) To help clients become experientially aware of the functional unity of the body/mind/spirit continuum and to become attuned to the deep intelligence that runs through all the levels of our being.
- 2) To unwind the organism and to create an environment in which a healthy pulsation of energetic flow through all the systems can be maintained. This process involves freeing up emotional and physical energy that has been bound or repressed in tense, numb, under or over charged areas of the organism.
- 3) To deepen breathing and thereby to expand each person's capacity to experience and contain pleasure and other intense feeling states.
- 4) To bring awareness to the different characterological attitudes which have become structured into the organism and which limit our fluid, unitary and fully alive response to our environment.
- 5) To increase awareness of non-verbal communication and to foster a sense of congruence through all the levels of our communication.
- 6) To ground and center ourselves physically and emotionally.

## **Spiritual Psychology**

Since my late teens, I have been committed to spiritual practice and involved with spiritual communities. For years I also taught Tai Chi Chuan and Taoist meditation. These life experiences and ways of being in the world permeate my energetic atmosphere and probably have a profound impact on my clients whether or not the issue of spirituality ever enters the therapeutic relationship.

Over the past twenty years, the interface between spirituality and psychology has generated an enormous amount of literature, practical innovation and philosophical debate. I would like to touch on three basic ideas which seem central to spiritual psychology. These are the distinctions between the Self, the

Psyche and the Personality. This discussion will also further elucidate the principal of the self as a process.

Dr. Tom Yeomans in his excellent pamphlet "Spiritual Psychology, an introduction" (1992) describes the Self (capital S) in the following way:

*The Self is seen as the organizing principle of a lifetime, providing a context or container for the vicissitudes of experience and the development of the human being. It is that principle within a human experience that 'knows' the direction a particular life can take toward fulfillment and maturity, and which can guide this life according to this knowing. It is thus in a dynamic relationship with the other dimensions of a person's experience...*

*The Self has no particular qualities, or attributes, but rather is the context for all of our attributes and characteristics. It holds and integrates the different dimensions of our experience, and can be seen as the capacity to hold simultaneously any polarity or contradiction in our experience. When touched directly, it is experienced as a pure beingness that is connected as well to all other beings and to an experience of larger life, Great Spirit or God (Yeomans, 1992, p.10) .*

The Self is thus synonymous with the creative ground of our being. The energies of the Self touch our lives as we practice the arts of presence and authenticity. The Self is the space between all things, the magnetic tension that holds the fabric of life together and yet has no substance of its own. It is awareness itself, that something that exists before and after there was an object, the field of all possibilities, the eternal present, the nameless, the Tao. As such we are deeply and inescapably embedded in the Self. Although the Self touches and permeates every aspect of our lives, we can conduct ourselves in such a way that we become out of harmony with this creative source. The root of this disharmony is always some form of fear or disconnection from the fabric of love. When this happens we experience a sense of soul starvation which expresses itself in a variety of symptoms and pathologies and in the violence which we do to ourselves and the planet.

The Psyche is envisioned as structural and includes the conscious, the unconscious, the pre-conscious and the super conscious. These dimensions are in a constant interplay with each other, transforming, digesting and processing psychic energy. The Psyche is that which mediates the energies of the Self with the identifications of our personality in time and space. At the level of the Psyche we are in touch with the collective archetypes of humanity as well as the specific patterns of our cultural group, language or family. These patterns rest in any of the various levels of the Psyche and are potential containers through which the energies of the Self may be expressed. Rituals and initiations which activate these patterns and invite the energies of the Self to 'incarnate' and become embodied are powerful ways to move energy and to revitalize an individual or a group.

Yeomans conceptualizes the Personality "as a system of identifications that has developed in time/space to insure the survival and growth of the person"

(Yeomans, 1992, p.14). As such it is the level at which we are most subject to the impressions of our environment, particularly our early familial environment. This system of identifications may be a more or less functional container for the creative energies of the Psyche and the Self, and shifts and moves as we develop. As such it has both a superficial and a deep structure, as it is rooted in both the specific facts of our family of origin and in the collective energies of humanity. In the context of Spiritual Psychology the work we do on our personality is a process whereby we create a vehicle which can hold a deeper, higher and broader range of our potential energy which ultimately has its source in the Self.

These levels are somewhat arbitrary and have been addressed in different ways and called different things by other schools of psychological and spiritual thought. However, the experiences they point to are fairly universal and as such may be useful categories for a clinician when faced with the nitty gritty of human suffering.

### **Systems Centered Therapy**

Systems Centered Therapy is a relatively new approach which Dr. Yvonne Agazarian has crystallized into a specific methodology over the past five years. Dr. Agazarian was classically trained in group dynamics as well as a variety of western psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic methods. Systems Centered Therapy grew primarily out of her enormous experience with groups. However the dynamics and principles which she uncovered are totally applicable to working with individuals. As a master therapist, Dr. Agazarian has spent her life looking for ways to create the optimal environment to potentiate the healing process. Systems Centered Therapy is the result of her life's work.

As my training in Systems Centered Therapy has gained in sophistication and clarity, I have been using it as a 'meta-lens' to help me understand the interventions which I make on every level and in any modality. The following will describe the four basic building blocks from which all the methods of Systems Centered therapy are built. These basic concepts are *Isomorphy*, *Hierarchy*, *Structure*, and *Function* (Agazarian, 1994).

Isomorphy is the idea that Systems have a similar shape at any level, however function in different ways relative to their context. An example of this is the way the internal system of identifications which an individual has at the level of his or her personality will reflect the psyche of his or her group or family. Similarly, the chronic tensions and characteristic postures of an individual will be isomorphic to their psychological make up. A scientific example of this is that each cell contains within it the DNA patterns for the entire organism. Isomorphy is similar to the principle of a hologram in which the entirety of the larger picture is contained in each aspect.

Hierarchy is the idea that "every system exists in the environment of the system above it and is the environment for the system below it" (Agazarian, 1994, handout). Thus we can notice that the Self is the environment for the Psyche which is the environment for the Personality which is the environment for

the body, etc.. If we apply the ideas of isomorphy and hierarchy to therapy we can observe that if our interventions are isomorphic and congruent at a greater range of the hierarchy of living human systems they will have a greater effect.

Structure is the idea that "every system is defined by its boundaries in space, time reality and role" (Agazarian, 1994, handout). This refers to the observation that living human systems, like all things, arise and disappear according to certain boundaries. Therapy sessions last for a certain pre-agreed period of time, occur in a specific space, require that the participants function in specific roles, and that they cross the boundary from fantasy into reality in regards to these parameters. The boundary of reality also requires an individual to cross over from the fantasies and thoughts they are having about any particular situation (which may be generating very real feelings which may or may not have any relationship to their actual environment) into the existential reality of their being in the present, in the particular environment they are in and their feelings about that reality. No therapy can be truly effective until all the participants have gotten their energy across the boundaries of space, time, reality and role into the therapeutic container.

Function is the idea that "systems survive, develop and transform from simple to complex, by the process of discriminating and integrating differences" (Agazarian, 1994, handout). Difference is always both irritating and a call to growth. As human beings we have a natural tendency to join each other around our similarities and to split around our differences. Whenever we notice similarities in the apparently different we have begun a process of growth and transformation. The reverse is equally true; whenever we notice differences in the apparently similar, if we resist the temptation to act out and scapegoat the difference, we have the opportunity to grow into the next order of complexity. An example of this is when a young adult leaves his family to go to college, he must face his anxiety about the differences between his high school environment and the university. As he notices that there are also similarities he is able to begin the process of integrating his new environment.

Systems Centered therapy has a complex and sophisticated methodology by which it applies these four basic constructs to the therapeutic process. These include a well researched understanding of the phases of group and individual development, and a specific hierarchy of defense modification which is applied within the contexts of each of these phases of development. Given the limitations of this chapter, I would like to merely point the reader in the direction of the resources he or she would need to access in order to further educate themselves about Systems Centered Therapy. (See footnotes)

### **The Psycho-Aesthetic Approach**

The heart of the psycho-aesthetic approach is the observation that the creative process is isomorphic to the therapeutic process. Both involve the participants in a dance which has elements of frustration and gratification and which result in a creative regeneration of the participants' relationship with self, other and the environment. As large portions of this book have already provided

an in depth analysis and development of this fundamental idea, I will not elaborate too much on the complexities of the psycho-aesthetic approach at this time.

The essence of this approach is captured in the following paragraph from *The Artist As Therapist*.

*In therapy, patients and therapists alike are engaged in finding the artists within themselves. The therapeutic process for patients is an ongoing struggle to discover true inner representations and then give them form in terms of developing richer more congruent realities. Therapists tap the artist within in the ongoing process of maintaining the individual holding environments that will provide the space energy and impetus for patients to change. Together both parties create a matrix in which verbal and nonverbal communications come alive as both parties are touched by common experience. This complicated mode of interaction takes on a form similar to a symphony or work of art, where multiple levels of consciousness and meaning exist simultaneously (Robbins 1987, p.21).*

## **Case History**

The following case history is instructive in that it touches so many of the dimensions of working in a holistic framework. As this was also quite a long therapy (seven years), it is possible to clearly note different stages of therapeutic development, from symbiosis through rapprochement and finally into autonomy and individuation as well as the dynamics of trauma and the working through of trauma. This therapy was also somewhat unusual in that the client was originally referred to me for bodywork, so that right from the start of our work touch was part of our contract. For therapists who are accustomed to working in verbal or even visual modalities this type of work may seem risky and perhaps even a little threatening. What I would ask is that the reader keeps an open mind and notices that the similarities outweigh the differences in a therapy that includes body-work and touch. Indeed, using the Systems Centered principle of isomorphy, one might hope that the interventions which a therapist makes through touch are congruent with his verbal communications.

Ellen was referred to me by her psychotherapist for 'emotionally oriented' body-work. Her psychotherapist had previously seen me for a brief round of massage therapy and was aware of my background and training in counseling. She had also done some emotionally oriented body-work during her own sessions and was comfortable with my ability to navigate the boundary between the non-verbal world of body based, energetic communications and the verbal world of emotional, psychotherapeutic processing. She felt that Ellen would benefit from the type of work that I did and that I would be capable of providing a safe container for her to address a level of healing which was difficult for her to reach in a verbal modality.

When Ellen first started to see me she was thirty three years old and working in a local government agency as an administrator. She impressed me as a well educated, sensitive and intuitive woman who was attractive in an unpretentious, down to earth kind of way. Her mournful brown eyes had a waif like quality and communicated to me a well of vague feelings that was intriguing. Her communication style was self reflective and I immediately felt engaged with her slow, thoughtful inner rhythm. I 'felt' her in my belly and solar plexus as she psychically pulled me in towards her and then energetically let me know when I had gotten too close. During her bodywork sessions she communicated this to me either by tensing up against my physical pressure, or more often, by going numb and out of contact which I felt as a kind of deadening or lifelessness in the energetic quality of her tissue.

Fairly early in our work we developed a good rapport. Her relational style had a strong pull towards symbiosis and merging which was resonant and comfortable for me although I was also aware of the potential mine fields that lay in store for us as we ventured deeper into her therapeutic journey. As we began our work, I allowed myself to enjoy the pleasurable rhythm of symbiotic mirroring and cuing which we quickly established. Each session we spent some time processing the emotional experiences which were evoked by the body-work. I felt centered, clear about my own boundaries, and warmly kind and contactful in my presence towards her.

Within the first couple of sessions Ellen told me that she had been incested by her older brother between the ages of 10 and 12 and that she had been raped as a young adult while working overseas. She had also had an abortion in her mid twenties while in an unsuccessful relationship with an apparently immature and dependent young man. She had a checkered relationship history with men and had not been in an intimate relationship for the past five or six years. She struggled with persistent feelings of emptiness and disconnection from herself and others and felt that her life had no real grounding or root. She used the metaphor of living on the second floor of a house and suddenly noticing that the first floor had never been built out. She felt she had no deep foundation to stand on either in her relationships or her career. Although she had two masters degrees and a respected job she felt like she was still living a student life, uncentered and unfocused.

During the first six to nine months of our work together, Ellen continued to see her psychotherapist. Her psychotherapist and I were in consistent contact and attempted to create a container that would manage the splitting which Ellen was prone to do, turning one of us into the good therapist and the other into the bad. After about nine months it became clear that it was difficult for Ellen to psychologically and financially manage seeing both of us simultaneously. Her psychotherapist was supportive of Ellen seeing me more frequently as she felt that there was more 'juice' happening for her in the body work. Her therapist felt that rather than fight against Ellen's tendency to split, it might be better for her to have all of her affect in one container. In hindsight, I wonder if we colluded with Ellen's defenses by not confronting her good/bad split. On the other hand, we also seemed to be cooperating with an organic process and perhaps, after five

years of working with her therapist, this phase of her healing had come to a natural end. As Ellen was 'birthed' into working with me as her primary therapist, we readjusted our sessions to include a good deal more talking and verbal integration, and eventually shifted over to a structure which only sometimes included work on the massage table. We also occasionally integrated several other forms of body oriented therapy into our work including movement, breath work, focusing and psychodrama.

### **Important Diagnostic Considerations in the use of Touch**

Before going further, it is useful to comment on some of the diagnostic indicators which a clinician who uses touch as well as verbal modalities might look out for in gaging the therapeutic usefulness of physical contact, particularly with clients who have histories of early deprivation and trauma. The benefit and danger of working with touch is that it tends to very quickly access the matrix of our primary relationships with our early care givers, as well as unconscious traumas which our body has stored in 'cellular memory'. Very early and deep needs for fusion can easily be stimulated and at times overstimulated. Certain types of character structures can become overwhelmed and flooded with primitive cravings for endless physical holding which also express themselves into the relational field with a host of toxic, perhaps even murderous introjects. When this happens the client quickly oscillates between a blissful merging with the therapist and feeling abandoned, terrified and enraged if the report is even momentarily ruptured or when the session is about to end. This roller coaster can throw the practitioner off center and the therapeutic relationship can quickly become volatile and difficult to manage. All traces of the client's observing ego seem to dissolve into the primordial ooze of overwhelming cravings for endless feeding and nurturing, or on the flip side of this, a deep terror and rage at being abandoned. These primitive affects attack or even seem to destroy the functional adult ego strengths and defenses which the client has built up over time. Rather than being a regression in the service of the ego, a regression in the service of its own ruthless momentum begins to develop. If this persists unabatedly for more than a couple of weeks, it probably also indicates that the problem is more one of character structure than trauma, although characterological issues and trauma often exist in a complex mix that makes the clinical picture quite muddy and hard to sort out. If the client is working more at resolving trauma, my clinical experience is that there tends to be more of an ebb and flow to the regression and that the client is just as relieved as you are when his or her adult, observing ego returns. In the case of severe characterological issues, even when the therapist is extremely present and nurturing, the client never seems to be able to reach a state of fullness or satisfaction, and the therapist learns, often only through hard experience, that all attempts to feed the client's hunger for contact only end in actually aggravating a kind of 'feeding frenzy'. The client has no center into which he or she can digest what the therapist is offering. In these cases limit setting and a firm confrontation with the reality of the ruthless entitlement of the hungry infant inside are called for. On the other hand, if the

client is able to retain a viable witness self from which he or she can notice these primitive affects and is able to regress and then re-compensate, accessing this early material or trauma can be useful and propel the client into a very productive period of therapeutic work. Two highly effective ways to develop this inner witness are to work with mindfulness meditation or in a creative modality which involves the client in a process in which they have to balance the flow of emotional material which they are attempting to express with the frustration and gratification of working in a particular medium. Once a sufficient degree of mindfulness and center have been developed, body oriented therapy at this level can be integrated and is rewarding for both client and practitioner.

### **Body-work with Ellen**

When Ellen first started to work with me there were large areas of her body that felt flaccid and unresponsive. Internally, she felt particularly out of touch with her pelvis and thighs, as if the electrical current of the life force had become no more than a trickle in the muscles in this area. She also felt uninterested and even afraid of sexual contact with men. When I worked with the muscles in her buttocks and legs during her bodywork sessions, I felt like I was reaching through layers of cottony, stagnant magnetism which muffled the signal of her life force. Stirring her life energy in these areas was a tricky business because if the current increased too quickly she would invariably go numb or dissociate by pulling her energy up into her head in response to the increased voltage. These were unconscious mechanisms which Ellen had probably developed as a child in response to her brothers inappropriate sexual contact and which were reinforced when she was raped as a young adult.

For the first couple of months during her massage sessions I worked mostly with her hands, feet, head, neck and upper back and made only light, non-intrusive contacts with her torso and pelvis. Whenever I began to approach the core levels of Ellen's life force, my primary concern was to help her maintain a state of mindfulness and to study with her the mechanisms by which she defended against the sensations of charge and aliveness in her body. By creating an atmosphere of non-judgemental exploration, the fear and tension that was locked up inside of her tissues was encouraged to relax. Tentatively, she began the process of relearning how to trust another human being (particularly a man) at a deep organic level. As I coached and encouraged her she was able to keep breathing and remain present as waves of old frozen feelings began to melt and release through her body. At times strong feelings of dependency and longing were evoked through the touch and she had fantasies that I might be able to totally nourish and take care of her like a parent or a life partner. Gently and firmly, without shaming her spontaneous impulse, we had to work with limit setting and helping her inner child understand that there were boundaries to my time and availability. In this process I was often thankful that Ellen had done enough work on herself to develop a functional observing ego.

Over the years of her therapy, we experimented with different body oriented modalities. As she became more comfortable containing a charge in her body,

dancing to African drum music or Authentic Movement was often helpful in creating a safe space for her to celebrate her vitality. Deep breathing and stretching exercises from yoga and Bioenergetics also helped her to revitalize and detoxify her body. The most important thing about all of this was that I listened deeply to her non-verbal and verbal communications and found appropriate containers for the dynamics of the moment. In other words, I let go of my agendas and practiced the arts of presence and authenticity with both rigorous discipline and spontaneity.

## **Ellen's Inner Dragon**

Ellen certainly had a side of her that vehemently hated to be told 'no', was devouring, dependent and ruthlessly entitled. She called this her inner 'dragon'. However, she also had quite a developed inner witness which gave her an awareness of the destructiveness of this side of herself and of her propensity to break the therapeutic container. Diagnostically, the presence of a strong inner witness let me know that she had the capacity to hang in there as some of these powerful primitive affects emerged. Ellen also had a history of incest and trauma. Before her body-mind could integrate and transform some of the affects which she had locked away in her cellular memory she needed to have reliable access to her center. In a sense this witness self became a 'co-therapist' in our work which enabled Ellen to take responsibility for continuing her healing process outside of her sessions. One of the ways she did this was by writing in her journal or writing me letters about her reflections on her sessions. Early on in our work, Ellen gave me a copy of the following journal entry.

## **The Dragon**

*It does not want me to get well.*

*It does not want me to grow in trust...*

*It wants to control other people by mistrusting them, making them feel bad about themselves, killing with criticism.*

*It thinks to bind people, chain them to me, to please the unpleasable...*

*To keep endlessly devouring is to keep people attached to get well, to trust, to let people go free is to lose...*

*I get injured and I hold onto being injured in order to blame and coerce and enslave...*

*There are other disguises too that may serve it [the dragon], the victim, the martyr, the long suffering, selfless heroine [these] bait the trap, draw people into the door of the den, make them want to take care of me...*

*What if I dropped the disguise and was authentic? I would be a human being, vulnerable, made out of flesh with a great desire to be loved. I would be very ordinary, not flashy. I would feel what it feels like to be in this body... Instead of feeling self pity I would feel my feelings. There is no great emptiness when I drop the disguise, no great question whether I exist. I feel solid, too solid almost...*

*I am afraid for Michael because I don't trust myself. I could present myself as one who wants to be rescued but as soon as he draws near again become the roaring dragon [endlessly devouring!]*

*Why does getting well seem like such a loss to me?*

*All of this is so manipulative. It really assumes that people won't give me anything unless I manipulate them into it.*

*The dragon is a defense. It assumes that if I am aloof and alone I will draw to me more love and respect than if I were available and able to receive. I ensnare people who want to help but I don't really receive from them...*

*There is a way to accept help in order to get well, and a way to refuse to accept help in order to manipulate the giver to keep trying. I do a lot of that.*

Ellen had a recurring fantasy of getting into some kind of accident which then led to her being doted on and cared for by someone, usually an older man. She was savvy enough to recognize this as a defensive, manipulative way that her psyche was asking for love and caring. During the first years of treatment, she was able to explore the emptiness and inertia (a feeling of being almost 'too solid' and impenetrable) that lay beneath her defensive roles. As we descended into these layers of her psyche, what emerged was a silent, unrelated state in which she sought to soothe herself by creating dark womb like environments. Often she would enact this by rearranging the furniture in my office or hiding underneath the massage table and barricading herself in with pillows. Silent and protected behind this barrier she soothed herself by rocking gently back and forth.

This state was often triggered by Ellen remembering the incest with her brother. These incidents, which occurred in the attic of her family's home, usually began by her brother asking her to role play a prostitute or his mistress and then progressed to his manipulating her into some form of sexual contact, usually oral. Ellen could also be thrown into this state if the therapeutic rapport was broken or she felt threatened by some unempathic or poorly timed confrontation. As she rocked and soothed herself, I felt how she had to bury a part of herself to defend against her brother's inappropriate and intrusive sexuality, or my intrusive comment which mirrored and unconsciously reenacted this inner structure. I also felt Ellen's confusion, because in many other ways she had an affectionate and trusting relationship with her brother. When she was able to talk from inside her fortress she would let me know how comforted she felt to be able to explore her inner state so graphically in my presence. During these sessions, I would often sit quietly just outside the perimeter of her protective barricade and synchronize my breathing with hers. I felt like a protective, non-intrusive older brother who was respectful of her confusion and pain. As I waited patiently, I felt her slowly gather enough courage and trust to be able to come back into contact with me. Usually, the first contact was made through touch, when Ellen would ask me if I could reach through her barricade and place a reassuring hand on her shoulder. During this period I was also aware of how important it was that all of Ellen's (and my) adult sexual energy remain outside of the room until Ellen's dissociated self could be integrated and contained.

During my vacations, particularly in the first years of her therapy, Ellen would often regress into this state for days. Again, writing was a way that she began to name and process her feelings. Often she would send me letters which we would discuss when I returned. The following is an excerpt from one of these letters.

*With you gone, the whole center that I counted on, the anchor, the connection to the earth, seems to be gone. I feel so abandoned that I've put up very effective walls; the offerings of comfort or friendship that people give me I can't let in. Its like my heart is buried away somewhere way inside and can't be touched, it doesn't feel safe enough, it doesn't believe in goodness any more to let itself be touched.*

After one vacation, Ellen marched into my office, asked me to stand up, placed a large pillow in my arms, and pounded on me, screaming "how dare you leave me alone like that! I was so alone!"

In the third year of her work with me, Ellen was contemplating leaving the area to pursue a career possibility on the west coast. Although this never actually occurred, the possibility of her leaving therapy really began to heat up her issues around autonomy and dependency. During this period she wrote:

*Part of me doesn't want to go at all - why leave what is secure and familiar. Maybe I could find more life here, maybe if I just dig my roots in deeper...*

*Part me is quite disillusioned. She wants you to take care of me and to be the only one to take care of me. To her this adult effort to see you as only human feels very abandoning. "Where will I hide" she says, "Where will I go for comfort".*

*It feels like a betrayal of you too, to see you as anything less then she had believed. The adult part of me is trying to gather resources and gather strength, to pull together my ego, be decisive, take action hold to vision. This part of me is trying to shore up resources to take care of myself.*

*A part of me would much rather have you take care of me than take care of myself and feels a lot of loss - loss of that intimacy and comfort, but also loss of the illusion that there is someone outside me who can take care of me.*

*It is hard growing up.*

*There is tremendous loss in letting go of my dependency on you, it is like saying good-bye to childhood, because, though I hope I will be loved and cared for again, it will probably never again be in that way.*

*My child doesn't feel ready; she wants to cling for more safety, more love, more dependence.*

*But I cant help but see that in the wider picture I am ready.*

As Ellen worked her ambivalence around feeling autonomous and independent at deeper and deeper levels, she began to become aware of how furious she was at her own tendency to become dependent and at how much this had cost her in her life. In our sessions we began to get a clearer picture of her dependent, depressed mother who had a very difficult time supporting her in her moves towards individuation, and who had also emotionally and energetically

abandoned her in quite profound ways, both as a young child and particularly when she was incested by her brother. As she became more convinced of my solidness and trustworthiness as her ally in her fight for independence, she was able to work her rage quite productively in the transference.

*...Sometimes I am so angry at you, and it scares me to be so angry at someone so important to me. And even this, feels like the old stuff of being meek and not really saying what I think for fear of losing or destroying the other person...*

*I wonder if you have gratified my need too much - you give so much warmth - it was part of what I first loved. But now I feel like I have turned to you rather than to the world and feel trapped in a dependence that may not make my life better... Was I that messed up?*

*Anyway, you are returning in my mind to Michael again, concrete and real and 'there' for me. I feel furious at my dependence, and the way it pulls me away from life. Then I feel the dependence come up, whispering that if I can just sleep in you the world will go away.*

In the fourth year of our work, Ellen took a job for three months out of state as an advocate for women's rights. As part of her job she had to work with many abused women and adult survivors of incest. This time away from our work gave her the chance to 'try her wings' without totally leaving the safety of the therapeutic relationship. The work with incest survivors also gave her a chance to see how far she had come. She wrote:

*I've started to read *The Courage to Heal* again [a book about healing from incest]. It is really amazing, the difference in me. Though I feel things, and insights occur to me, I'm simply not flooded by reading it the way I was before...*

*It is really confirming to be able to read these books on incest and still be in balance. What was so toxic for me last year, as I thought about doing the survivors group, feels much more matter of fact this year.*

As Ellen made these ventures and moves towards independence, she also began to shift the focus of her spiritual life. Because the nature of her new spiritual work was so close to my own, my sense is that this was also a way of further internalizing our work and taking me with her even as she separated. Ellen always had a strong spiritual focus in her life, mostly within the tradition of the Episcopal church. In fact at one point, she had considered becoming ordained as a minister. As she became more spiritually adventurous, Ellen started to take classes in Yoga, meditation and massage. During one stage, Ellen seriously contemplated becoming a massage therapist and took a month long training program in massage at a Yoga ashram. She wrote to me from the ashram:

*Dear Michael,*

*I am having a wonderful time; I really am grateful to myself for having earned this time for myself...*

*I'm trying to show up here with my consciousness and awareness in much the same way that I show up in your office, making each moment count. I am loving doing the body work... And the yoga is great and so are the sauna's and the walks and the grounds and the food and the dance classes. It is very busy and active and I have lots of energy...I feel playful, energized spiritual, open, loving...*

*...I'm having a blast and I feel lots of your kind of spirit around me here, and I feel very integrated, my child with my conscious adult and my body with my mind... I feel lots of clarity, and keep expecting the clouds to come in, but they just don't.*

Love,  
Ellen

### **The Uses and Abuses of Spirituality in Ellen's Healing Process**

As Ellen experimented with various forms of spiritual practice she discovered that there were times when her spiritual work helped her to ground and center herself in deep and productive ways and then there were times when it brought her out of contact with herself and reality and left her feeling disconnected, spacey or lost in some other worldly bliss that made it very hard for her to deal with the nitty gritty of her daily life. These spiritual adventures and misadventures all became grist for her healing work. As we distilled her experiences together we discovered several things. Firstly, those spiritual practices which were too unstructured or undirected seemed to give her characteristic ways of defending against life and relationship too much room to create a 'comfortable' dissociation or trance which was similar to the states of consciousness which she retreated into when she was incested as a child. For example, the stark purity of Vipassana mindfulness meditation, in which the only instructions are to follow the rise and fall of ones breath and to witness, without grasping, ones sensations, thoughts and feelings, too often encouraged her natural tendency to detach and enclose herself in a bubble that was unrelated to the world around her and ultimately also dissociated from the roots of her own aliveness. After these types of meditation sessions, Ellen complained that she felt anxious and unfocused, like she was drifting inside with no internal anchor or sense of herself. It was crucial to distinguish this state from what the Buddhists talk about as the experience of 'no-self' or the quiet emptiness that is filled with the magnetism of 'all that is'. This was not a creative womb filled with the undifferentiated essence of the universe which Ellen had entered, but rather a movement towards a rather fragmented, disorganized state which threatened the very sense of ego and self which she had worked so hard to develop. Developmentally, Ellen was not ready to dissolve something she had just begun to master! On the other end of the spectrum, Ellen also experimented with practices that deliberately and forcefully raised the energy in the body in a highly structured way. For very different reasons, these 'fast path' practices didn't work

for her. An example of this was her experience with Kundalini Yoga. This practice involves rapid, intense breathing combined with particular yoga postures. This type of yoga can really shake up the body-mind and also effects the energy field of the practitioner quite powerfully. Unless one has quite a lot of stability both psychologically and physically the energy released can be overstimulating or disorienting. After a brief one day workshop in these practices, Ellen had a very clear sense that it would be more balanced for her to open these energies gently.

The spiritual practices which proved most useful for Ellen were Hatha Yoga and a Buddhist chanting practice which focuses on gathering ones life energy so that one can very concretely manifest one's ideals in life. Hatha Yoga with its gentle emphasis on stretching and alignment and deep, unforced breathing helped her tremendously in creating a vital and alive experience in her body. The Buddhist chanting practice kept her squarely in relationship with herself and her world and provided her with a container in which she could focus her life force on very practical issues as well as the more long term goals of gaining clarity about her ideals and the qualities of consciousness that she was developing. The Buddhist organization provided her with a community of practitioners and clear, down to earth guidance as she worked with the practice. The chanting was also performed with the eyes open and focused on an ancient Japanese scroll which kept her oriented to her environment as opposed to her internal reality in which she so easily became ungrounded or lost in fantasy. Both of these practices worked against her tendency to 'trance out' and/or dissociate.

The world of spirituality is vast and filled with a wide variety of practices and paths to enlightenment. Depending on the developmental level that someone is working on, a particular discipline will be appropriate or inappropriate. There are no hard and fast rules that I know of to help anyone make this discernment. One might also expect that people will move from one discipline to another as they round out their spiritual growth. The important thing is that as therapists we help our clients to listen to their inner voice and help them to test the fruit of the particular practice they are exploring. It is crucial to let go of our attachment to any particular discipline or philosophy. It is also useful if we have at least some first hand knowledge of a variety of spiritual practices so that we can engage in an intelligent discussion about the possible merits and drawbacks of the discipline which they are exploring.

There are also many ways that spiritual practice may be directly experienced in the therapeutic relationship. The best and most common way this occurs is for the therapist to implicitly convey the magnetism of the spiritual dimension through their own quality of presence. More explicitly, the therapist may use guided imagery exercises which evoke spiritual guidance or work energetically to awaken the higher levels of vibration in the clients aura. Creative exercises which require that the client wrestle with issues of meaning or purpose can also bring spirituality directly into the therapy.

## **Ellen's New Feelings of Sexuality and Her Movement Towards Autonomy**

During the fifth year of her therapy, Ellen began to hold more and more charge in her body. She rarely went dead or numb physically or psychologically. For the first time in her sessions she began to approach some genuinely adult sexual feeling. This was exciting stuff, as she noticed how different it was to feel her adult sexual feelings as opposed to the clingy, dependent feeling which she so often got confused with sexuality. Our work became more present focused and we spent many sessions simply following her moment to moment experience of her new found sexual charge in herself and in her relationship with me. As Ellen moved into exploring more genuine sexual feelings, touch became an interesting boundary for us to negotiate. Like a father with an adolescent daughter, I tried to celebrate Ellen's sexuality and flowering femininity without sexualizing our relationship. When this worked, I was able to communicate to her with a smiling playfulness how proud I was of her attractiveness and allow her to explore all of her new and unfamiliar feelings without intruding any of my own sexual feelings into the relational field.

This year, Ellen also moved a couple of hours out of town for a new job and began to cut back on her sessions and also to do some of her therapy over the phone. There was something organic and right about all this, and I felt like a father whose child had finally moved out on her own as I looked forward to seeing her every other week when she came to town. At this time, I remember filling up with joy and pride at the young woman I saw flowering in front of me.

During one session, Ellen presented me with the following dream which she had xeroxed from her journal.

*I had moved someplace or was staying for a summer someplace, a lovely brick townhouse, but lonely. I remember something really making me cry - some deep grief of my mothers or something. I was with someone who was trying to talk me out of it, but I felt, no, that I had to feel the grief in order to pray for it and turn it over to God. Then there was something violent going on, a fight scheduled for my apartment and I left.*

*I went outside to some kind of conference. I went into a church, in my jean shorts, but felt uncomfortable there, so I left before the procession came in.*

*The stars were wonderful - and there was a planet, like Jupiter with its moons seen up close. I was with a man who I was close to, and we looked at the planet for a while - he thought it was the sun.*

*Then a dust began to fall. First one child began to cry when a part of her face began to rot. Then it was everywhere, like snow and we ran away.*

*Then the guy I was with turned out to be Michael and we made love. It felt so good to have him inside me, like I was complete. We hardly moved much, just rested with him inside.*

*Later on I saw him with his wife. He seemed a little uncomfortable with us together but I wasn't. I felt that the love and the rightness that I felt was its own justification. I expected that it would work out that he and I would be together.*

*Then Michael was doing a massage demonstration for the conference and I volunteered to be the subject. He used some kind of wooden contraption like a*

*press with different planes of wood to match the different angles and thicknesses of each part of the body. It was very relaxing.*

*I was helped out of that [the wooden contraption] and asked to lie on the floor. I could hear Michael coming up the stairs with his baby and when he was looking for someone to hold her I took her. She was very odd, laughing very hard, a runty little thing with buck teeth that looked like an ape. He had brought her in swinging between his hands, laughing.*

Ellen felt comforted by this dream. In many ways, the dream touched the themes of our work over the past five years. The images were symbols with a multiplicity of valences and meanings. The grief over the loss of her mother's support, moving away and individuating, the loneliness, finding a cosmic universal context for herself (looking at the stars), the child crying, the birth of her sexual feeling, internalizing me (quite literally), the Oedipal fantasy that we could be together while another part of her was aware that I was married and had a young daughter, feeling supported by the structure and bodywork that I gave her (the wooden contraption), and my giving her the child to hold which was also part animal and filled with instinctual life. These were some of the associations that we touched on as we worked with the dream. All of these images carried feeling tones which resonated in sonorous ways through the spiraling path of Ellen's growth.

Over the next two years, Ellen continued her process of individuation and began to make tentative forays into relationships with men. A couple of months before she met the man she fell in love with and eventually married, she wrote me:

*Dear Michael,*

*What a lovely day I've had!*

*I skipped work - just called in and said I wasn't coming and slept and ate and took myself out for a long cross country ski trip around an island near my house. It was so beautiful - the yellow sunset through the trees, the ocean with chunks of ice, the crystal clear moon in the blue sky, water and trees and sun and snow, a fog horn in the distance...*

*I was thinking about you. I have missed you, a little, and felt just a little lonely. But most of what I felt was proud, proud to be branching out, sending down my roots, building my life... It is a little like going off to college. It is sad because I am leaving something behind, but I also feel so proud to be able to move on in my life.*

*That's the way I feel. I feel really proud...*

Soon after this letter, Ellen fell in love. She wrote:

*I do want you to know that I am with the dearest, sweetest man in the whole universe; I had such good instincts when I set my sights on him last year. It's funny how you just know when it's right. The tenderness, intimacy, openness*

*and honesty between us is just incredible. I think I see him pretty much for who he is and just really love him. He loves me very much too. He will say "Do you have any idea how much I love you?" It is interesting how much more balanced and stable my life feels with two of us in it together. We aren't formally married of course, but it's just a matter of time...*

Ellen was married about a year after she sent me that letter. She never formally terminated her therapy and still occasionally calls me for a phone session when she runs into a snag in her relationship or at work. She continues to keep up with her spiritual practices which she does for an hour and a half or more every day before she goes to work. As far as I can tell, with only minor bumps, she has been able to maintain a successful intimate relationship, and continues to develop her career in creative and interesting ways which give her a substantial amount of pleasure and satisfaction.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have explored the quality of presence in a therapeutic approach that explicitly touches the levels of the body, mind and spirit. The principles of working in this way are: a keen attention to the moment to moment process of the therapeutic encounter, authenticity, an awareness that the self is a process which is organized by our intention, an understanding of the reactive mind which obstructs the natural flow of our mindful presence and authenticity, a clear affirmation of the functional unity of the body, mind and spirit, and a working knowledge of the various developmental theories which conceptualize the ways in which we achieve or get waylaid on the path towards emotional, physical and spiritual maturity. The four traditions which I have rooted these principles in are Body Oriented Psychotherapy, Spiritual Psychology, Systems Centered Therapy, and the Psycho-Aesthetic approach to depth oriented treatment. I have also presented a case study in which all of these principals were applied in the concrete reality of a therapeutic relationship and which included therapeutic practices which addressed the physical, psychological and spiritual dimensions of the clients experience.

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