

BODYWORK

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The mid-1970s saw a blooming of alternative therapies along many paths. Among them was a new interest in techniques of bodywork, a method that derived, in the main, from the work of Wilhelm Reich.

Stated simply, bodywork is about reconnecting the mind and the body. Reich theorized that emotions were actually a body experience, that feelings operate as a flow of energy in the musculature. We are alienated from a wide range of physical sensation — almost everything, in fact, except pain and sexuality. At the same time we lose contact with our own deepest emotions.

Moreover, even when we are aware of what we feel, we are severely restricted in expression. It is hard to find a situation in which we can let go in safety and with full encouragement. Our society simply doesn't support that kind of behavior. Abandon can be found only in spectator sports, some churches, at wild parties which are usually stimulated by alcohol, or in one's car while driving on the freeway. It is hardly surprising that the '80s have seen a proliferation of sports-related riots, of freeway violence, of evangelical ecstatic churches. Heavy-drinking, heavy-drugging parties are a way of life for many Americans.

Wilhelm Reich and the Origins of Bodywork

Reich, a disciple of Freud's, was trained in psychoanalysis. After a number of years, he grew critical of the practice, impatient with its length, restive because its results were so often imperceptible. He began to experiment with more dramatic and concrete techniques.

Reich fastened on Freud's theory of "libido," or sexual energy. To Reich, the notion that the human psyche is powerfully influenced by some form of energy was intriguing. A literalist, his dissatisfactions with psychoanalytic results prompted him to ask a set of concrete questions about the idea. Until that point, Freud's writings had a typically metaphorical quality: he postulated the existence of libido, but was unconcerned about examining its exact nature or consequences. Reich set to work to understand the ways in which body energy is akin to psychological energy, and the ways in which both become disrupted.

Connections between mind and body had become very obscured and alienated during the Victorian age, a process both abetted by Freud's emphasis on the intangible unconscious, and challenged by his revolutionary emphasis on sexuality. Reich's attempts to spell out the exact nature of that connection quickly took on a revolutionary character. The more he examined the ways in which mind and body are an organic whole, the more he was also forced to look at the ways in which individuals are a part of the social order. As he looked more and more inward, more and more concretely at the individual's psychology, he found himself looking more and more outward, or politically, at the way the individual was connected to society. Reich hypothesized that energy became blocked in the body, that circulation and electrical sequences were literally altered by patterns of tension in the muscles, and he asked how that blocking came about. What happens to people to block energy?

Oppression, Reich answered. As people are painstakingly formed into beings who fit the needs of society, their natural impulses and inclinations must be inhibited and altered, or oppressed. To do so, the physical manifestations of those impulses, the actual tendency of muscles to behave in particular ways, must be changed or blocked.

Pig in the Body

Children are taught many injunctions (see Chapter 5) that have concrete consequences for their bodies. “Don't cry!” little boys are told. Men, however small, are supposed to “be brave.” To show what you feel is a disadvantage in a competitive world (“The other boys will think you're a sissy; you'll never get chosen for the team;” “If the boss knows how scared you are, how much you want the promotion, he'll think you're weak and pass you over.”). Men (and increasingly women in the business world¹) are supposed to be able to take what comes to them, do the job however adverse the circumstances, go-it-alone without fear or sadness. So “be a man, son,” and dam that flood of tears.

But it takes a physical as well as a mental act to stanch a flow of tears. You must hold back your tears, gulp down your sobs. To do so, muscles must be contracted and held: the throat tightens, the chin trembles, the lips compress. The more often you repeat the process, the more adept you become. You can stifle your sobs more quickly, more thoroughly. Eventually, you develop a habit; like Pavlov's dogs, you learn to respond to the slightest impulse to cry with the clenching and tightening needed to resist. The body takes over; not-crying becomes as automatic as crying once was.

Meanwhile, you still feel sad. With no outlet for the feeling, it becomes an intensely painful sensation. So the mind turns away from consciousness of that about which it can do nothing. But it is difficult selectively to erase emotions. The brush wipes a clean slate, and along with sadness vanishes a wide range of other feelings. “Don't cry!” bleeds over into “Don't feel!” “Don't feel!” becomes justified by “Feelings are a weakness,” which suggests, “The world is a cruel place; bear up and fight hard.” An ideology is formed, that corresponds to the shape of the world. A competitive society *is* a cruel place, and it needs people who will compete hard in order to work.

What we have presented here is a very simplified sketch of how social injunctions are internalized, through the medium of the body, and become psychological systems. In the '70s, as many people turned to Reichian work and to Bioenergetics to address their physical-psychological selves, we, too, became increasingly aware of the body component of our work in groups. We developed our own version of bodywork.

Radical Psychiatry Bodywork

What we sought in bodywork was a supplement to group work, which tends to be verbal, rational, linear, and goal-oriented. We began to offer monthly sessions, usually on a weekend morning, where group members could experience alternative ways of working on their problems. The first model for this work was developed by Claude Steiner, who did one session monthly for all the members of his groups. Before long, other practitioners began offering joint sessions, open to members of all Radical Psychiatry groups.

We rented a dance studio, in order to have enough space for ten to twenty people to move around and to lie down. Several group leaders would be there, assisted by as many trainees as possible. We scheduled three to four hours, and instructed people to come dressed in loose, comfortable clothing and to bring along foam mats, sleeping bags or blankets. In the early days, we offered these sessions as part of the “deal” when people paid for a month of group; in return, group leaders did not meet with their groups once a month (the origin of “leaderless group”).² After some time, bodywork practice became more specialized, because it interested some group leaders more than others. As that happened, we struggled with the economics of the matter, and began to charge a nominal additional amount for the

¹ A fascinating portrait of how women are changed by the business world is offered in *The Third Sex* by Patricia McBroom (William Morrow and Company, New York, 1986), an anthropologist who studied high-powered women working in finance.

² See Chapter Nine for more about the subsequent history of this idea.

bodywork sessions, to cover the cost of studio rental and to pay the “specialist.” We will return to the questions of money and space, and the unresolved problems we struggle with in relation to them.

We apply to bodywork all the same principles that underlie our other work. We seek to share power, and to keep a cooperative contract.

Contracts

As in group, we begin by making contracts, although these are for the session only. Everybody sits in a circle, and each person says what she or he is there to do. Sometimes, when bodywork is an unfamiliar way to work, people may start by saying their fantasy about coming to the session. Often, we help people to connect that fantasy to work they are doing in group. A woman, for instance, who has a problem with Rescuing, and has made an ongoing problem-solving contract to ask for what she wants, might contract in bodywork to express whatever she feels. She may be worried that she'll pay too much attention to other people's sounds, feel sorry for them, want to help, and lose touch with her own needs and feelings. She can ask permission from the group to ignore them, and decide firmly that her own work is her top priority for the day.

Other typical bodywork contracts are: “Getting angry,” “Crying,” “Feeling good,” “Releasing tension,” “Getting in touch with my feelings,” “Relaxing,” and so on.

Warming Up and Getting in Touch

Generally, the work begins with some warm-up exercises, anything to loosen muscles and get people in motion. They should be fun; we frequently do them to background music — a little rock'n'roll goes a long way to loosening people up!

Next, we might do an exercise that relates to a number of contracts. It's surprising how often common themes can be found. If several people are working on anger, for instance, we might have the group growl at each other, or fight for a towel, or walk around shouting “No!” at each other. Bioenergetics practitioners are a rich source of these thematic exercises. But this is also a chance to be creative and, again, to have a good time.

The core of Radical Psychiatry bodywork is generally the next phase of the session. We ask everyone to lie down comfortably. We suggest that they loosen their belts, remove rings and watches — generally unfetter themselves so that they can move in any ways they wish. Sometimes we'll talk people through a simple “getting-in-touch” exercise. Always, we interject a great deal of explanation of what we are doing.

Bodywork has a tendency to become mystified. Because we are habitually cut off from our bodies, when we begin to re-experience them, we are apt to be surprised. Many of the sensations and experiences of bodywork seem extraordinary to people. It is easy to attribute the fireworks to the magic of a leader, or to be scared about the secret capabilities one discovers in oneself. We seek to put the process back into the realm of the ordinary, to give people ways to possess their own work intellectually and well as physically — a direct outgrowth of our commitment to responsible uses of power.

We begin by explaining the process on which we're about to embark:

The purpose of bodywork is to provide an opportunity for people to speak from and with their bodies. Our culture causes us to disconnect our minds and bodies. As a result, we stop being conscious of what is happening in our bodies. This exercise is designed to help get reacquainted.

Close your eyes and breathe naturally. Let your arms relax at your sides. Focus in on whatever it is that you're conscious of right now, to whatever is occupying your consciousness. Consciousness is not limited by this room and this moment. Right now you might be in the past or in the future or in another galaxy. Pay attention to where you are right now and when you have a clear idea, speak out and say where you are so we all can hear. I'll give you some time to get in touch with that.

When you are ready, imagine that your consciousness is a light. You can use this light to survey your physical self and to notice what is going on. Start with your toes, imagining that the light reveals what is inside them.

Gradually, we talk people through a slow and gentle journey into their bodies. Most of us have a very limited range of possible discoveries. We may notice that some part hurts, or that another part is tight. We ask questions in order to stimulate an increase in available vocabulary:

Shine the light on your thighs. What do you find? Are they hot or cold? Soft or hard? Is one higher than the other, or shorter, or thinner? What color are they inside? Are they shiny or dull? Does the light reflect off them, or is it absorbed?

Each question is followed by a sufficient pause for people to introspect. Timing is very important in these exercises; the leader needs both to keep the process moving, and at the same time to be unobtrusive, to stimulate ideas without dominating them.

Eventually, we ask people to report on their experience. We encourage them to be wild and bizarre:

One of the ways we're separated from our bodies is that we're told many of the things we experience are crazy. It is not all right to tingle, or to feel your thighs are ropes or sponges or whatever. Here's your chance! Anything goes here.

Hesitantly at first, from one corner of the room and then another, people begin to speak:

"I found my stomach was like a cave. Its walls were pocked and shiny and black and red and cold. But there was a warm stream of golden liquid flowing through the cave, shining light everywhere and making me feel good."

We congratulate the person on her description, encouraging other imaginative ways of expressing our inner experience.

"I felt that my feet were much higher than my head, although I know I'm lying flat on the floor. When I shined my light inside my head, it seemed flat, like the inside of a book, while my feet were soft, and squirmy, like they were full of worms."

"I had a pain in my chest. When I looked at it, it was a knot of metallic strands. Only, while the light shined on it, it began to soften and unravel, and the pain went away."

Deep Breathing and Emotional Release

Already, we begin to see body changes, happening gently and without effort, just because of a change in consciousness. After everyone (who wants to) has spoken, we continue with a new set of instructions. In what follows, we concentrate especially on creating a climate of safety, in which people can do and express exactly what they please:

What you've just done was to use your mind to gain a better understanding of your body. You might have noticed that the simple fact of concentrating attention on some part of your body changed the way your body felt. As your body sensation changes, so also will what is available to your mind. In this way, we can go back and forth between mind and body.

In this session it is OK to express what your body has to say. The kinds of things that people do when they express what we feel in our bodies would probably create difficulties in the outside world. We provide a situation here where there is total safety. It doesn't matter what you do with your body, what posture you assume, what movement you make, whether you cry or scream or yell; it's all OK, and you won't get criticized. You need feel no embarrassment or fear. The worst that could happen is that somebody else doing this work does not like whatever you are doing, and they may say so. But then you don't have to stop as long as you're not physically injuring anyone, and we will make sure that you don't accidentally hit or hurt someone or yourself.

These statements are designed to create a sense of trust and safety so the person can effectively deal with the strong messages which we all hear from our Pig (see Chapter 5) when we are about to express a strong feeling. Typically the Pig will say things like, "You are making a fool of yourself!" or, "This is childish and immature. Stop it!" or, "People will hate you for being so crude." The leader's reassuring statements come from her own Nurturing Parent, and provide the participants with ammunition against injunctions from the Pig. The permission and protection we provide in this way are essential to effective bodywork:

Some of the sensations you've been reporting — feelings of floating, hollowness, or heaviness, tingling or tight bands around some part of the body or energy fields, streaming sensations or what-have-you — can be alarming. People who feel them can get scared that they are losing their minds, which is in fact true. You are being encouraged to lose your mind, but remember that it is perfectly safe. You can get it back anytime you want. You are not really losing it — just setting it aside for a while.

If you get scared, however, say so, and if you want something ask for it. We will be here for anything you need. If you need a pillow to hit, or an extra blanket because you feel cold, or someone to hold your hand or hug or massage you, or if you need a tissue or something to spit or throw up into, just ask. We are here to take care of your needs while you explore your feelings.

Now that we've set the stage, making it safe, and encouraging people to ask for whatever they want so that it will continue to be safe, we begin to shift gears. We teach people how to alter their breathing in order to intensify their feelings:

How we breathe has a lot to do with how much we feel and also perhaps how we feel. Not breathing deeply has the effect of constricting your feelings, and breathing deeply has the effect of fanning your feelings like embers in a fire. If you blow into them, the embers will glow and sometimes flames will break out. It's the same with feelings: breathing will make them more vivid, and sometimes it will cut them loose into a roar.

I'm going to teach you a little bit about breathing deeply in order to facilitate your contact with your bodily feelings. Now you will use the power of your mind, of your consciousness, to alter your body. In turn, your body will make available to your consciousness more intensely experienced feelings.

At this point we give a brief exercise in thoracic and abdominal breathing, teaching the difference and then showing how to combine the two in order to maximize respiration. We instruct people first to breathe into their chests, expanding them as fully as possible on the exhalation. We suggest they notice which muscles limit their chest's expansion, and self-consciously increase their capacity. Sometimes it is helpful for people to lay a hand on their chests, and sometimes a helper will gently touch a tight spot.

We turn next to the abdomen, again instructing people to breathe more fully, to allow their bellies to balloon out with the inhalation and collapse with the exhalation.

Finally, we suggest a three-part breath: inhale into the chest, then into the belly, then exhale fully. It sometimes takes a while, and some individual coaching from the assistants, for people to get the knack of breathing so fully. Also, people may begin to experience peculiar sensations, and to get frightened:

It is common for people to begin to feel some unusual tingling while breathing deeply. That's normal; don't be frightened. As muscles begin to relax, they may shake. It's good to let yourself shake. Also, some people's hands may contract and stiffen. This is a phenomenon called "tetany;" it is harmless, and you can stop it anytime you want by shaking your arms, breathing normally, or a variety of other ways.

You may want to raise your knees, plant your feet firmly on the floor, and let your legs hang in a comfortable position. This allows your hips to relax. Also, it is a good idea to breathe through your mouth. Most of us have tight jaws, a result of the many injunctions we have not to speak. Mouth-breathing helps you to relax your jaw.

Sound and the Capacity for Expression

Now we are ready to move to the next phase of the exercise: making noise. Again, the politics of this move coincide with the bioenergetic consequences. Our most heartfelt feelings are literally silenced by society; in order to release those feelings, we must relax the muscles which restrain expression. Making noise helps:

When you are ready, make a noise as you exhale. It can be any noise, anything that suggests how you are feeling. It might be a sigh, or a growl, or a song or a laugh.

One of the ways we are oppressed is that we are limited to a very small range of expression. We can speak words, if they are rational and "sensible." But if we go around growling, or sighing, or shouting, we are considered crazy and locked up in asylums.

Here's your chance to break the rules. Make whatever sounds you please. Nobody outside can hear us. Nobody inside will mind. Go for it!

Often, because we have no models for sound-making, it is helpful for the bodywork leader to make some noise herself. She may walk around the room, picking up the muted experiments of people, and mimicking them, making them louder, more strange, playing with variations on them. Be experimental, all in the service of giving people permission and ideas.

As the sounds begin to flow freely, people will start to experience waves of feeling. Someone may weep, someone else to shout and become angry. In another part of the room, a man laughs uproariously, while a woman screams. All these expressions are fine. The leaders and assistants move about the room taking care of people. Someone may want to pound with angry fists; pillows should be securely placed under her hands so she won't hurt herself. Someone else may want to curl up and be held while she cries. Tissues and sips of water are freely supplied. People often want necks or backs or hips massaged, to help in the relaxation of tense muscles. Some need to hear nurturing messages to help fight off restraining Pig messages. "You're doing just fine; let it all come out. What you're feeling is good and right."

It is very important that the helpers provide what is wanted, but also they should not jump the gun. We often have a strong impulse to Rescue, and it should be ardently resisted. When in doubt, it is better to ask people whether they want something, and what it is, than to plunge in unasked. It is helpful for the assistants to keep people's contracts in mind, and to remind people to be guided by them.

Throughout, the leader periodically reminds people to keep breathing. The release of emotions often comes in waves, with people taking heart from others in the room, or responding to their neighbors' work. So also are their occasional group lulls, when a little cheering on may be helpful.

There is a common "Bodywork Pig" that is biased in favor of big, noisy, explosive work. Emotional release of this sort can, indeed, be very relieving and illuminating. Often, though, very subtle changes happen that are just as important. To experience a tingle when one has felt nothing but big feelings for years is a revelation. Men, for instance,

often need space to feel exactly what they feel, to be in touch with the softer and smaller sensations. It is very important that the leader not prejudice the work in one direction or the other.

The bodyworker develops an intuitive sense of when the group as a whole needs encouragement to do more, and when the work is finished. At some point, usually after an hour to an hour-and-a-half, she will say:

We're going to stop soon. Think about what you may need in order to finish. Ask for whatever you want.

When you are ready, slowly sit up. Let's form a circle and talk about what happened.

Wrapping-Up

The closing circle is an important part of the process. Adequate time should be left to do it fully. People are urged to report on their experience, and to finish anything that is incomplete. Don't send people back out into the world without this kind of completion.

"I started out feeling really silly, and a little pissed off. I didn't want to breathe in such a peculiar way. Then you said to do whatever you want, and so I started to yell, 'No! No, I won't breathe deeply!' I realized quickly I wasn't kidding; I was really pissed off, and you brought me pillows so I could pound. I had an old-fashioned temper tantrum — it felt great! But as it ended, I remembered how I was punished as a small child for tantrums, and suddenly I got terribly sad. I cried and cried. It was terrific to have Sandy hold me. Now I feel all soft and glowy. What an experience!"

Another person looks uncomfortable and reports, "Nothing much happened for me. I breathed and breathed; I really worked very hard at it. After awhile, my hands stiffened and tingled. I didn't like it at all, and so I stopped breathing, but my hands stayed stiff, and I was getting really freaked out. Finally, Mark suggested I clap my hands together. That worked, and was fun, and I laughed a bit. But generally, I felt awkward and shy and I'm not sure why this was useful."

Someone asks what his contract was. "To feel whatever I feel," he answers. "Sounds like you did that," the bodywork leader comments. "Now that you know how to handle the tetany more effectively, maybe next time you'll be less distracted by it."

The group member replies, "I feel bad about doing so little when other people had such big responses. I need some strokes about what I did."

Strokes (see Chapter 8) are almost always easily forthcoming after a group experience as powerful as this one. Someone from the same problem-solving group says, "I know from our work together in group that just to come here was a big event for you. I also really am moved that you hung in there, and saw the thing through when you were scared. I think you did do big and important work."

Strokes

After everyone has reported, the session ends with strokes. One of the side-benefits for us in doing bodywork in this fashion is that it helps to extend the Radical Psychiatry community. People from various groups meet each other, and have elaborate strokes to give at the end of working. People often need strokes by the end, because they have done work which runs so strongly counter to the Pig. Make sure that everyone gets what they need, and that people are not shy about asking for particular strokes, or strokes from particular people.

VARIATIONS ON A THEME

As we write this chapter, in the late '80s, we are in the midst of yet another re-evaluation of bodywork. We have no doubt of its value. But the fashion for this sort of work has passed in the culture. Fewer group members are excited about doing it, although they often become more interested after having experienced it once. Without pressure from our groups to offer bodywork, we have a tendency to overlook it. Arrangements are difficult to make. It is hard to find spaces large enough, and they tend to be expensive. Mounds of pillows and covers and tissues and so on have to be carted to the rented studio. Over the years, we who practice Radical Psychiatry have become busier. We do more groups, more Mediations, more individual sessions. To take time out for bodywork has become increasingly problematic.

Lately, we have begun experimenting with other ways to do more intensive work with group members. We are holding a series of one-day sessions, at about three-month intervals, in which we do more experiential work, although not necessarily bodywork. At one, for instance, we talked about the theory of the Pig, and then divided into small groups so that people could fight their Pigs using psycho-drama techniques. Interestingly, in the very early days of Radical Psychiatry, we used to offer something called Permission Workshops which were not dissimilar to these All-day Intensives.

Nonetheless, we are not happy with the difficulty we find in integrating bodywork into our practice. Here is a continuing frontier for more experimentation.