

## **Running Ahead: Embodied Spirituality in Therapy**

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## Abstract

Western religious traditions have emphasized the separation of body and soul or spirit. This workshop offered a theoretical and practical resistance to this separation of the self. Participants explored how the explicit inclusion of the body in therapeutic experience enhanced self knowledge, connection with others, and experiences of transcendence. The following objectives framed the structure of the workshop and this paper.

1. Explore three ways in which explicit connection to bodily experience can be used with clients in therapy.
2. Recall the experience of being more grounded in one's own body.
3. Identify two ways in which a client's closely held affect may be released in therapy.
4. Recognize the somatic aspects of spiritual experience.

## Biographies

Paula Foley, MSW, has worked in palliative care for almost 22 years. Paula is a singer songwriter, reiki master and a student of bioenergetic analysis - body psychotherapy. Paula is a new mother and with this gift has come a deepening vulnerability. Being awake in her body, remaining hopeful and wild hearted while of this world has been a challenging sacred journey.

Leslie Ann Costello, Ph.D., teaches psychology and practices psychology and bioenergetic analysis in Bangor, Maine. She is interested in people's experiences of self in relation to others, especially in infancy, parenting, and partnering and how these threads come together into the fabric of connection. She is a mother, mother-in-law, step-mother and grandmother.

## Embodied Spirituality in Therapy

*Spirit is not a mystic concept. The spirit of a person is manifest in her aliveness, brightness of his eyes, in the resonance of her voice and in the ease and gracefulness of his movements. These qualities are related to and stem from a high level of energy in the body... Sensing the harmony between the internal pulsation of our body and that in the universe, we feel identified with the universal, with God. We are like tuning forks vibrating at the same pitch (Lowen,1995, 314-315. ).*

The experience of being human is the experience of living in a body. Embodied experience is our natural way of taking in the world. However, as conscious beings with the capacity for memory, we have the option of living part of our lives in a less embodied way. That is, we can live in our memories of events, experiences, and feelings, or we can live in our worries and projections of the future. In both of these cases, the mental experience is privileged over somatic experience. In fact, most of us learn to minimize some of our bodily experiences, particularly experiences of affect or emotion, and thus we become less attuned to what is happening in our bodies in the here-and-now. When therapists are tuned out of their own bodily experience, they lose a vital connection to themselves which can lead to a vital connection with the client. For a therapist, “being-in-the-body” allows being with clients in a way that helps them to access and express feelings, and provides a healing space for both parties. Being present to one’s own experience fosters a therapeutic presence for the client.

Spiritual experience is often conceptualized as “higher than” or more important than bodily experience. However, all experience is body experience; our bodies are our connection to the world. Learning to attend to our own body experience, particularly the experience of being-

with-another, as therapists are in the therapy room, helps us to be open to clients and provides the client with a model to be open to their own experiences of sensation, feeling, and emotion.

Bioenergetic analysis provides us with our theoretical framework. This psychodynamic model suggests that we create tensions in our bodies to try to regulate affect and emotion. These tensions become chronic and thus are experienced as areas of numbness or deadness in the adult body. (For example, a person may have very little awareness of her back. She knows that it is there but cannot actually feel it unless touched or in pain.) In addition to chronic tensions, people also develop characteristic defensive behaviour patterns that are physically manifested in the body in forms such as stooped shoulders (“carrying the weight of the world”), pelvis tucked under (“tail between the legs”), or shoulders pulled up toward the ears (“hung up”) (see Lowen, 1976).

The workshop was designed to help therapists get in touch with the subtle messages of their bodies. The goal was to help them to use their body knowledge to help clients to connect with deep affects. Expressing deep feelings while in the holding relationship with the therapist often feels profoundly spiritual. We sought to help therapists to find the place of deep feeling within themselves so that they can assist clients in reaching that space.

The workshop experience was structured to meet four objectives through personal experience. We invited participation, while reminding people to be mindful of their particular body constraints or needs. We led a series of activities, seasoned with quotes from somatically-oriented therapists, and included opportunity for reflection. Participants left with a handout which included the workshop activities, quotes, and a recommended reading list.

Within this paper, we have used the objectives as a structure. For each objective, we listed on the handout a number of possible activities, but did not do all of them during the session. This paper includes the workshop activities as well as the additional items. The

activities which we implemented in the workshop are described in detail. For further information, contact the authors.

### The workshop

Systems never heal. The therapeutic mask of healer accomplishes no cure. Only the living body, our inspired nature, touches deeply enough to awaken the power of life in others. Over time our voice embodies. It is likely that we pay a high price to speak from a grounded place. Therapists who put their foot upon the path of healing do so consciously - or unconsciously - to heal themselves. They step with easy footing upon a quiet grassy path and the cool breeze of the mountains playfully tugging at their hat. Years later they find themselves desolate in a treacherous swamp with little idea of their path in or out. At such times the therapist is called upon to find that divine nature within the self that can light a fire to keep him warm for the night and many nights to come... Many of us have been well-intentioned healers only wishing to help other people, blind to our own precarious footing. It was inevitable that we should be led by the flickering lights into the depths of the swamp. Among our teachers, there are clients that reveal mysteries from the depths of their being. They call us away from the safety of superficiality and shallowness of feeling. They call us out of our intellectual reverie, our egocentricity and our professional persona into dangerous and essential places. (Conger, 1994, 252).

The 24 participants and two co-facilitators gathered and were seated in a circle. Presenters offered a welcome and the quote from Conger (1994), above. Participation was

invited into the experiential workshop with the understanding that participants would respect their own physical and emotional limits. Since all of the activities would be included on the handout to be provided at the end, we suggested that people put away their notebooks and just be present to what was happening. We then offered the concepts of embodied spirituality and bioenergetics as the theoretical, philosophical and clinical framework for what was to follow. We (PF & LAC) made our stance explicit: as clinicians/ healers we must know ourselves and have a deepened capacity to be at home within our own physical bodies. In so being, we may offer a grounded presence to those with whom we have the privilege of journeying.

### *First objective and activities*

#### **Objective 1: Explore three ways in which explicit connection to bodily experience can be used with clients in therapy.**

1. Body Scan: What do you notice in your body right now? Scan your body with your mind's eye. Use the body to access the present moment.
2. What do you really want? Practice attending to your body's messages; what do you *really* want for lunch, for example? (Rosenberg, Rand & Asay, 1984).
3. Focusing: use the mind to locate the *felt sense* (Gendlin, 1979; 1984) in the torso.

*Body Scan:* Participants were invited to bring their awareness to their body, with eyes closed, while sitting in their chairs. They were told to begin at the toes and bring their attention to each part of the body in sequence. This gentle observation of the body included sensations, emotions, feelings and thoughts. Clients were invited to notice the nature of their breath. Direction was given to observe from within the body without judgement but instead with a soft mind and soft eyes; they were invited to “just notice” what their experience of themselves was in that moment.

The body imposes limits and we function best with discipline. Our bodies humble us; they define in ways that link us with others. In the metaphorical separation of our nature, our body is portrayed with base appetites as the improbable companion to our psyche-spirit self, as the stubborn burro or the dirty pig. Nonetheless, the body is not always stupid and coarse waiting for spirit for a glimpse of light. The body-psyche-spirit *ménage-a-trois* is more complex and mysterious because the body soars, the body educates, the body guides, the body structures the reality that spirit enters (Conger, 1994,196).

*Getting Acquainted and Beginning to Feel the Body:* Participants were then asked to break into groups of three. The invitation was to share their names and answer the question, “When do you feel the very best?” Adequate time was given for all to share. The group began to come together and build as laughter and talk filled the room.

*Body experience and the experience of faith:* These were addressed in the following quote from Alexander Lowen.

Faith is a quality of being: of being in touch with oneself, with life, and with the universe. It is a sense of belonging to one’s community, to one’s country and to the earth. Above all it is a feeling of being grounded in one’s body, in one’s humanity, and in one’s animal nature. It can be all of these things because it is a manifestation of life, an expression of the living force that unites all beings. It is a biological phenomenon and not a psychic creation, (Lowen, 1972, 219).

*Group exercise: Grounding, activation, and connection:* At this point participants were invited to stand in a large circle. The next 30 minutes were given to leading the group in

bioenergetic exercises. The purpose was to deepen the experience of aliveness in the body and awareness of what it is like to have greater intimacy with self, other and by extension the Sacred. The process began with grounding – establishing a connection with our feet and the earth which holds us.

Grounding may be thought of as a function of movement, as a moving wheel that touches the earth. Grounding is about relatedness, not only the rim as it touches, but the connectedness through the spokes of the wheel. We cannot be grounded and be disconnected in our bodies. Just bringing our energy down into our feet and legs in a grounding exercise won't do. We contain polarities which must not be disowned. We reach for the sky, extending up and out, as well as root in the earth.... Groundedness demands that we honour the polarities of our nature. In so far as we refuse to relate to others, the outer world, or inner agents of our own character which remain in shadow, disowned or undeveloped, we unplug from our grounded nature. (Conger, 1994, 63).

### *Second Objective and Activities*

**Objective 2: Recall the experience of being more grounded in one's own body; a grounded therapist is a prerequisite to a grounded client.**

1. Feel your feet; stretch and work the muscles of your feet. Use a dowel, golf ball, or other object to help. Go SLOWLY and pay close attention.
2. Practice allowing your weight to sink to your feet and notice that your feet and legs can hold you up. Exercises that deepen our grounding and stability are the **circling** and **rocking** exercises. From a standing position, circle your weight around the bottoms of your feet. After doing this for some



time, rock the weight from front to back of your feet. Notice the difference before and after and between one foot and the other (see Conger, 1994).

3. Practice the forward bend, pushing your feet into the floor, allowing your head to hang loosely, moving very slowly and deliberately so that you can attend to all the sensations in your body and all the thoughts and images in your mind. (See Lowen & Lowen, 1977)

The next phase of the bioenergetic sequence focused upon activation. This included the importance of adding one's unique sound/voice as another dimension to greater aliveness.

### *Third Objective and Activities*

**Objective 3: Identify two ways in which a client's closely held affect may be released in therapy.**

1. Breathing opens up feeling. Be aware of breathing and practice different ways of bringing in and letting go of your breath. (See Farhi, 1996)
2. Activating the body moves energy and requires oxygen, so you will open up the breathing. Adding your voice is another dimension of your unique expression and aliveness. Voice is anchored in breathing and vibration. An example of adding voice to an exercise that increases the vibrancy or charge in our body would be the **low karate kick**. This kick is one where we kick down from the heel toward the floor while being balance on the other foot. Add your voice as you kick with an enthusiastic "HA". Repeat this about 5 times on each side. Return to the grounding position. Notice what is happening in your body.
3. Do the bow to move energy and feel your breathing deepen. (Directions for the bow can be found in Lowen & Lowen, 1977, page 65.)

The final sequence of exercises was relational. The previous sequences had expanded participants' experience of themselves. At this point participants were invited to be both with themselves and with another while not losing themselves.

#### *Fourth Objective and Activities*

#### **Objective 4: Recognize the somatic aspects of spiritual experience, including interpersonal spiritual experience.**

1. Mutual gazing; use looking deeply at another person to communicate on a body level. For the first activity, the participants were directed to find the distance from their partner that felt comfortable, to stay within themselves and notice their own experience as they gazed into each other's eyes for a period of several minutes. After checking in about this part of the activity, they were then asked to gaze with the intention, "I am in the presence of the Divine." The third variation was to gaze while touching with right hand pressed against right hand. Each time all were encouraged to check inside themselves and to check with each other. "How is this for you?" "What is happening now?"
2. Back to back sitting on the floor; standing back to back with weight leaning on each other. The directions included to notice the sensations in your body and to notice your partner's breathing. At the end of the exercise, partners were invited to share with each other. It was apparent that people had a lot to tell each other about their experiences.

The group was invited to return to their chairs to reflect on their personal experiences of the activities. We asked for a few moments of quiet, internal reflection, and then opened the floor to sharing experiences.

## Conclusion

This workshop offered an experience of being-in-the-body to therapists. The quality of therapeutic presence can enhance the client's access to and expression of deep feeling. Expressing deep feelings in the presence of an emotional connection is a healing and spiritual experience for both client and therapist. Use of bioenergetic exercise to ground and activate helps people to be more present to the opportunities afforded by connection. The simple interpersonal activities (connecting by mutual gaze and by feeling the mutual support of back-to-back sitting) helped participants to connect to the possibilities of using their own body awareness as a way to be more present to clients.

*Authors' note:* We deeply appreciate the enthusiastic participation of the people who found themselves in our workshop. Their willingness to explore their responses to new and different activities, and to share their experiences, made the group much more than the content that we presented.

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