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SONGS MY MOTHER TAUGHT ME

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When I was first contacted about a title for my talk, I couldn't think of one, then this title came to me. Later I thought about it and wondered -- why on earth did I tell them that title? My mother didn't teach me any songs! It is true that my mother did love music but she had a very private, precious, world of music into which I was not invited. I knew there was a lot of wonderful things in music, and a lot of wonderful places and feelings. So, not only was I not sung to, but I believed that I myself couldn't sing. But I have progressed since then and so I hope to end this talk with a song!

I started to think about what I wanted to share with you and this is really part of my search for understanding myself. Like many of you, I grew up feeling not a very good kind of person and I thought that was my fault. So, my search has been to try and discover why I was so frightened, why I could not do things, why did I freeze in some situations and why did I have difficulty in making contact with people. I am still on that journey and am still trying to find answers to my questions.

Why did I go back to my mother singing to me when she never did? I thought to myself, "What would she have sung to me?" The first song that came to mind was 'What Should We Do With a Drunken Sailor.' Then I thought of the next verse which was "Put him in the scuppers with a hose pipe on him." And then I realized the connection. My mother had a passion for cold baths. Cold baths at the age of six. She, my brother and me. Of course I was the one who was six not my mother! We would all have cold baths, in the nude of course. I remember, at one time, reaching out to touch my mother and I still remember the expression in her eyes. She froze me more than the cold water froze me and I realized this was part of the world I grew up in -- a world in which excitement was not good. It wasn't named sexual excitement -- that would have been too much. It was just excitement -- or put another way -- being alive.

So that was an eye opener to me because, thinking back, I wasn't terribly badly treated as a child yet I had all these difficulties. I wasn't obviously sexually abused, I wasn't obviously beaten to death, but now

I am beginning to realize that I was sexually abused in that I was aroused and then stopped by my mother. And so now my mind turns to Sigmund Freud and his attempt to understand his own and other people's sexuality.

As you know, Sigmund Freud was initially very interested in Charcot and hypnotism. He tried to use hypnotism but he was a failure as a hypnotist so, instead of hypnotizing his clients, he had them lying down and he listened to them. And when they talked to him without censoring what they said, they told him a great many surprising things. Now, these were patients with severe hysteria who had come to him because their symptoms disabled them. Freud was very surprised to find that, as they told him about their childhood, their symptoms started to disappear. But he was even more surprised at what they told him, because they told him all about the sexual abuse they had experienced as children. When Freud presented his papers on hysteria to his medical colleagues, detailing the sexual abuse of his patients, he received a very hostile reception. Freud was very upset, his practice practically disappeared, and he wrote some very sad and disillusioned letters to his close friend.

At the same time, Freud was trying to analyze himself through his dreams. He was his mother's favorite son, his mother being much younger than her husband. It seems likely now, looking back on these events, that his mother was sexually seductive to him. Also at that time he became aware that he had very angry feelings towards his dead father whom he had idealized. So rather than blaming his mother for being sexually seductive, he invented the Oedipus complex -- which says very simply that the child has innate feelings of wanting to have the mother and kill the father. Having thought of this, he could now go back, review those clients who had told him of their sexual abuse, and say they weren't really sexually abused -- it was their Oedipus fantasy. One of the results of the concept of the Oedipus complex was that it averted therapists from the fact that sexual abuse was common and that what caused symptoms later in life was, in fact, rooted in the relationship that parents had with their children.

Perhaps we can look back at Oedipus himself, this figure from ancient Greek legend. He was very badly treated. He was abandoned as a baby, his foot was injured and he was left in the fields to die. No wonder he had problems.

One of the major experiences in my life, and this is about Alexander Lowen, was the way he talked about his clients and their relationships with their parents -- that it was out of these relationships that their feelings had become imprisoned in their bodies. So, it was actually what happened to people in these relationships that decided the way in which they could have their adult relationships. This made absolute sense to me but I found a snag -- I couldn't find in myself and in some of my patients exactly where the mistreatment had been -- it seemed to be somewhere that I couldn't reach, both in myself and in others.

Then I became aware of the kind of research that had been going on about small children, mothers and babies, in the last ten to fifteen years, particularly by Daniel Stern and others. He talks about how a baby develops a sense of self in the first two or three years, how that baby develops a relationship, how it feels understood. I thought -- this really relates to me -- because I never felt understood. He calls it attunement between babies and mothers and it happens normally all the time. The baby does something, the mother uses the baby's rhythm and the baby's reaction and intensity, and reacts in harmony to it; the baby then feels encouraged and feels there is an outside world that fits his inside world. As I see it, the baby comes into the world with a great big bundle of love and with the ability from the very beginning to start to make a relationship -- and this relationship is made by the body and the eyes.

This is another thing about our tradition. One of the first people to talk about eyes was Reich. Reich has written, very perceptively, about the interchange between the mother's and the baby's eyes and he describes what happens when the mother's eyes are blank and the little baby's body retreats from her. There are some very sad situations, for example, when the mother is depressed, and of course this is reflected in her eyes. The child cannot make a connection, and that child may grow up to be an adult who always feels alone, always feeling that there is no one out there who can actually relate to him. Eyes are so important in the first year. The baby's best distance for focusing his eyes is ten inches, which is the distance between a baby's eyes and mother's eyes when the infant is breast feeding. That eye contact starts from the beginning and is absolutely vital in telling us if we are wanted or not wanted.

If the baby is sad and the mother responds to it, the baby feels understood. If the baby is excited, and this is where I had a problem,

and the mother disapproves, the baby takes the message that excitement is not good -- that excitement is forbidden, and at this very early age, the baby's body will freeze some of its capacity to be alive.

I realize again, for me the expression in a person's eyes is where I feel understood and, perhaps because Al Lowen's personality and excitement fits some of mine, this was something I felt when I made eye contact with him in London. It was a major factor in bringing me to New York.

So, now finally I would like to get back to singing. One of the most interesting recent discoveries is that a new born baby's right brain is more developed than the left. This is the side of the brain that takes in singing and absorbs it. It is also a very interesting fact that mothers in all different cultures tend to hold their babies on the left side, which frees the left ear and covers the right ear. This means the mother's songs and voice go straight into the right brain, which is very conveniently there to receive it. Singing and sound and lullabies are part of the beginning world and secure base of the newly arrived child. Earlier it was thought that mothers hold babies on their left side so the baby can be near the mother's heart and hear her heartbeat. It looks like both these ideas are true and there may well be other things we do not know.

The theme of singing brings me to share with you one of the most moving therapy sessions that I have ever watched. It was in a European workshop. The client was John Bellis. He was, as many of you know, a very senior figure in Bioenergetics, but he had decided this time to come as a participant in the workshop. I think the session represents for me attunement -- a true meeting between two human beings and a kind of reconciliation. I know, for him, it was a very emotional event. Afterwards he sent me a very beautiful letter. What happened in the session was in one way very simple. A young man, who was the therapist, carried John on his back and as he carried him he sang to him. He sang this -- "Swing Low Sweet Chariot, coming for to carry me home" and I truly felt at that moment that John felt he was being carried home. So finally, I have sung to you and I now wish you all a safe journey home.