

BIOENERGETIC ANALYSIS

The Clinical Journal of
the International Institute
for Bioenergetic Analysis



VOLUME 7 / NUMBER 1 / FALL / 1996

THE RECOVERY OF SELF AND THE CLIENT/THERAPIST RELATIONSHIP IN BIOENERGETIC ANALYSIS

Robert Hilton

In 1972, after four years of training in Bioenergetic Analysis, I wrote the following statement. I titled it Apologia: A Statement of Faith in Life.

"I stand here as an embodiment of my struggle for survival and self-expression. In my structure you see the way I make contact with the world, the way I reach out and bring in and the way I say no and withdraw. You see what I expose and what I protect. You also see that I have been spending most of my energy surviving and less being alive. I have built a box for me to live in so you can't get to me yet that survival form has now become my prison.

But I am a living organism which means I am evolving, moving building up and discharging energy. In the past I have used this energy to create a form that is my expression of being. I now find that I am anxious; the energy that was once used in maintaining my form now seeks expression in new ways of contact and being. Yet the form I have become for survival resists this new emergence of life.

I don't understand my state. I have lost contact with the function of my structure. I can't remember the reason for the tightness in my legs and the constriction in my chest. I only know that I cannot let through or allow the movement in me to emerge.

I turn my frustration against myself in self-accusation. I call myself dumb, stupid, immature, childish, crazy. I become desperate. I punish, push and attempt to force my own form to change shape. I retreat and withdraw. I look to others for their pressure upon me to move me. Then in my exhaustion to give up, give into the form, accept the imprisonment, surrender to my body, acknowledge the futility and illusion of my power. I think perhaps my body, in its own wisdom, will inform me as to who I am by

reviving the memory and feelings that created me and, if so, perhaps can teach me what I need and what is the truth of my existence.

I begin to surrender to my helplessness and I begin to remember. At first I am sorry I started the journey. When sensation emerges into tears I'm sure I can't stand the pain of the memory. As the past comes into my awareness and threatens to overwhelm me I withdraw my request and attempt again to assert control. I now feel that survival is safer. However, as the tears subside a strange thing happens. In that moment of contact which brought the pain, I discovered me. I recovered for an instant the person I am; the love locked in my chest, the longing in my eyes, the fear in my belly. I am aware now that my tears were not only tears of pain, but tears of reexperiencing a lost love, a rediscovery of my being in the world, which I had abandoned, a reacquaintance with the child I was and could not care for and tried to shield from harm by enclosing him in a protective shell until someday I could return and rescue him from his terror and fear. That momentary return was the reunion of life to itself, the return of the soul to the body, the return of form to the life energy that had created it. The return of the **I** to the **me** and felt as one.

No longer able to forsake me life, I take my new found child in my arms as he tells me how lonely and frightened he has been. He clings to me, at first disbelieving, and reminds me of how he had given up hope of ever being released. By his desperation, he informs me of his fearful existence. With a new courage born out of the contact with life, I introduce my child to a new friend I have found who will help us cooperate with each other in the world in which we are awakening. This therapist-friend provides contact with wisdom and love through which we may allow our new emergence to take place. His emergence and ours evolves into a renewal of self-expression over survival, and slowly this grounding issues in the melting of the old form as it evolves into the new.

That movement in me that leads me from contact with an old love to contact with a new love becomes the evolving adventure of my life. Out of such an adventure I am reborn."

Bioenergetic therapy, as I experienced it at that time, gave me a means of rediscovering a lost part of me. However, ten years later in

1982, as a result of personal circumstances in my life, I went into a suicidal depression. At that time I realized that while my Bioenergetic therapy had helped me discover my true self and, as I said in the paper, "recovered for an instant the person I am," my recovery was far from complete and the new person I had found was not someone I could experience as an ongoing expression of my being in the world. I also found that I had not been able to integrate this new person into my relationship with others in my life. For this latter to happen I discovered that I needed a particular kind of therapeutic relationship which I had written about in the paper but had not found in reality.

I discovered in this state that I needed certain responses from a therapist that were essential for me in order to stay connected to my weakened and depressed self. The energetic expression of my body alone was not enough. I needed something else. There were no Bioenergetic therapists available at that time or certainly none that I had not trained or who was not a personal friend and professional partner. I had had many years of Bioenergetic experiences with various trainers, some of whom I tried to make into therapists, but in fact I had not had an ongoing regular therapeutic relationship either in my training or in my present position as a trainer.

Fortunately, I found a woman therapist who had been trained in Biodynamic therapy who was also available to contact me in my desperateness. I needed someone who worked with the body and recognized it as the energetic core of self-expression and source of the true self, but more than that I needed a person who wanted to connect to me; not just a body, not just a problem, not just a character, not just an energetic system, but me, with all my weaknesses and needs.

I discovered that my essential drive as a psyche/somatic organism was not only to build up and discharge tension, although that is an important biological reality, but was to seek out contact that would support my emerging self. I sought responses in the world that would allow me to go on being and becoming all that I can be, not simply to survive, but to Be. I was alive, but without an adequate self to support my life in the world, it was living hell. In fact, my depression was a welcomed relief from the terror of this hell. I could cry; that represented the energetic core of myself. But in addition, I want to discuss with you the relational self needs which I had to address in a therapeutic

relationship in order for me to feel enough support to go on being in the world.

The first of my needs, and this is not necessarily in order of importance, was the illusion of **CONTROL**. I use the word illusion because none of us is really in control of anything. However, at that time, my weakened ego needed to have the illusion of control in the therapy, and thus feel as if I had an influence over the therapist's interventions. This illusion was necessary before I could explore, any further, my weakened state without experiencing again the terror of total helplessness. I needed a therapist whose narcissistic need to be right would not be challenged by my desperate need to feel important somewhere with someone. Only then could I sustain contact with that part of me that felt such terror and shame about being out of control or not responded to in my original environment.

I recently had a client who had gone through our training program years ago, when we were only requiring nine Saturdays a year. At the end of the four years he realized that he had much more to learn so he volunteered to go back through the training again. For his second time around he chose me as a therapist. He came in to see me and we both knew, from his previous training, what some of his issues were. However, he surprised me when, taking out a piece of paper from his brief case, he asked if he could read me a list of what was going on in his life and what he felt concerned about. He then became very apologetic. He said he knew that he should get up and do body work and that in a few minutes he would go over the stool and later kick on the bed, but could he for now just read me his list? I responded that I would be glad to listen to his list and that this time around the therapy was to be for him and the way he understood his needs. Upon hearing this simple affirmation that he could have it his way, he began to sob with relief and gratitude that he could be heard, that he did not have to try so hard to please me, and that I did not insist that he be the good Bioenergetic client he had learned to be.

After spending several sessions during which I listened to his list, and what was of the utmost importance to him, and received his tears and fears of inadequacy, he said, "I feel that I would now like to go over the stool. I think it would help me open up more deeply to my sadness." No longer fighting for me, or needing my approval through performance, because he already had it, together as a way of furthering his

already open expression of sadness, we used the stool. His initial sense of control over the therapeutic encounter was necessary in order to repair an inner feeling of ego weakness which, prior to that time, could only be repaired through performance and compliance with authority figures. That the authority figure, or person he needed for support, would actually bend to his needs and follow his lead was amazing to him. He felt deep gratitude that who he was and what he had to say was that valuable. I held his wounded self in the moment so, not needing to fight me for control, he could give more fully in to experiencing the fear he felt at being out of control with his primary care givers.

The second experience I needed with my therapist was **confirmation**. All of my life I have been told that I could not sing, that is, that I had a nice voice but could not carry a tune. This was reinforced by the fact that my mother, when I was twelve years old, married a man with two sons, both of whom, along with him, played the guitar and sang. Also as a seminary student I was told to simply mouth the words while leading the congregation in singing a hymn. Virginia (Wink Hilton) has a lovely voice and plays the piano and at times I would try to sing with her at home. However, I always felt this huge shame around my singing. I decided this was a fear that I needed to face. I had faced my mother's rage, my father's abandonment and my own schizoid terror, but these were nothing to facing the shame of not being able to sing.

At our conference in Miami Beach, I decided to confront this shame and asked Ron Panvini, a Bioenergetic therapist and professional voice teacher, to help me. I had met him before and in fact had even had one other singing lesson with him at a conference at Whistler, British Columbia. I felt so much shame around this problem that it was a major therapeutic undertaking. We found a room with a piano that was away from all the people. We locked the doors to make sure no one disturbed us. I had told Ron before about the intensity of my fear and shame around this issue and he was very understanding.

We began with Ron playing some notes on the piano and me trying to sing the notes. I was so full of shame and fear that my throat was tight and I could barely make a sound, and the ones I did make did not sound anything like the ones he was playing on the piano. Finally I told him that this was not going to work. I told him to sit at the piano while I turned my back to him and made whatever sounds came out of my

throat. I needed to hear my sound regardless of whether or not it was the right one to make.

I turned away, faced an empty room, and began to make sounds. After singing a few notes, if you could call it that, I heard a response from the piano behind me. I made another sound and I heard the piano again. I began slowly to realize that I was making my sounds and Ron was finding the sound or note on the piano. Slowly I began to feel a marvelous sense of freedom to make whatever sound I wanted because I could not make a mistake. Whatever I sang, he followed me and found the note that mirrored back and confirmed to me that I was indeed singing. I at last turned to him with an expression of pleasure and pride on my face like that of a three year old who feels invincible to the world. He said, "Bob, you have just sung all of the notes to this song and done it perfectly." He had become the perfectly attuned mother/therapist. Ron had let me lead because I was physically bound up with too much shame and confirmed that, in fact, I have a voice in the present which is not part of my shameful past. It was also important before that I, in fact, allowed him to hear me in my shame and not hide it from him.

There is an old Neil Diamond song which goes, "I am, I said, to no one there and no one answered, not even the chair. I am, said I, and I am lost and I don't even know why." To be mirrored is the basis of building an authentic self. It starts in childhood and continues into our adult lives. We also need to have our suffering mirrored in order to bring it into the present; to confirm that we are not crazy, but that certain painful experiences of our past really happened to us. I remember once working with Al and being over the breathing stool when he suggested that I cry out "Oh God, help me." I finally did and then I raised my head up off of the stool to see if he was still there. I needed a witness to my cry, to my pain, to my shame and to my existence, at that moment in the world. The last time I made that cry was into the darkness of the night and without a witness to my cry. I did not know if I was real or not or if in fact my suffering was real. I needed a witness and a mirroring response to confirm my reality. In order to sustain my presence in the world, I needed an ongoing witness to mirror and confirm my truth; both my pain and my strengths.

The next thing I needed was **compassion**. Compassion is more than empathy. Kohut defines empathy as "vicarious introspection." The

Greek word for compassion is Esplagnia -- εσπλαγχνα. It comes from splagna -- σπλαγχνα, which is the word for one's inner organs; the heart, lungs, liver, etc. The Latin derivation of this word is *viscera*. You add an epsilon (ε) onto splagna and you have compassion (coming out of one's inner being). How one's inner organs are affected by a response to another is compassion. I needed to know that I made an impact on my therapist and that she was moved within herself in regard to my life and death struggle. She must bring something to our encounter that I cannot create with my cleverness or destroy with my withdrawal because it is part of her body responding to me, not her ego or therapeutic stance.

A client of mine told me how, when he was seeing a woman psychoanalyst, he told her the story of how he had been left in an incubator for days without being touched or seen by his mother. The analyst was so moved by his story that she hit the side of her chair and said, "I never would have left you like that." He was utterly amazed that she could be so moved and, of course, it was what he had not expected as a child. This caused him to break into the deep pain of the loss.

I was recently working with a mother who reported that when her baby was born he was partially blind and had a large birthmark across his face. While she was in the hospital she asked to see him again and the nurse said that all of the babies were busy having their pictures taken in the nursery. She then added that, of course, they would not be taking pictures of her baby. In my office, recounting this story, she screamed, "That's my baby." We both collapsed in tears.

We cannot expect that our therapist will have the compassion of a bonded mother toward us, but I did need to know that it would crush my therapist if, in fact, I didn't make it and committed suicide. Only when I knew that, which I had not known from my own mother, could I then concentrate on my own fight for life. I had to have someone in the world for whom I made a difference. A good enough mother/therapist who could not help but care and who could not help but be broken with grief if in fact she lost me. Not having to fight for this support of my true self, I could begin to use it to find the courage to sustain contact with my life in the world.

My next need was **contact**. When I experience that the therapist follows me, confirms my reality and has compassion for me, I begin to involuntarily release the tension in my body that has been there as a

protection against annihilation or loss of self. I begin to let go when I feel safe and I notice that a spontaneous breath begins in my body along with spontaneous movement. This spontaneous movement is always toward my care giver and is an attempt to reestablish the contact that was originally lost. My mouth may begin to quiver or my arms reach out or my eyes may try to see the other as if for the first time. This movement is an attempt to complete the original broken cycle of contact and to integrate this new experience into my psyche/soma as a tissue memory.

I have written a lengthy paper on touching in psychotherapy which I do not have time to go into now. I only wish now to point out two important aspects of contact that were necessary in order for me to stay connected to my weakened self. One was the permission I was given to touch my therapist as an expression of love and gratitude. We need to be able to touch the one we love in order to ground this experience in reality. Al has often said, "We can touch our patients, the problem is that they are unable to touch us." Or as one therapist put it, "Our job as therapists is to teach our patients to love us and than to let them."

The second important aspect was her freedom to touch me when I was so regressed in shame that I could not contact her. I remember one important moment in particular. I was lying on the bed and my therapist sat beside me. I put her hand on my belly while I touched her belly with my hand. Parenthetically, the first time I held her hand, and I realized it was connected to her as a real person, I screamed. This time I felt the quiet assurance of her presence. Nothing can be substituted for appropriate physical contact. It keeps the impulses alive and grounds them in the other. In physical contact our feelings and relationship to another person are no longer fantasy but reality. Such touching by my therapist was obviously not an answer to what I had missed. But it did, however, cross the bridge of shame and support me in facing how I was not touched as a child. It also gave me the possibility of a new avenue of relationship in the present.

The next need comes right out of the need for contact, and that is the need for **containment**. Opening up all of this closeness, love and contact, I must have containment on the part of the therapist. She made it completely clear that from the moment I became her client we would never be involved sexually or in any way that did not honor our original contract. This made it safe for me to love and hate completely and to

grieve what might have been. I really do not need to belabor this point. For her not to have complete containment over her own needs and responses to me would have devastated me. I was in no shape to look out for her and me too. I needed complete freedom to explore my feelings with her, without the possibility of winning her over as a sexual partner or her investing in me any of her own phantasies. I also needed her containment when it came to my exploring my negativity and rage. I needed a relationship that could contain all of me, both the love and the hate. I had never risked this depth of expression within a relationship before. I had hit the bed and raged many times and had a trainer have me look at him and express my anger. However, this was all done as a Bioenergetic technique, aimed at releasing the tension in my body surrounding the repressed feelings. It was rarely done within the relationship itself.

One day when I was very depressed, and sitting on the couch in the waiting room of my therapist's office, I could hear laughter coming from her treatment room. Soon she walked out laughing and joking with the client she was then seeing. She saw me sitting there in my depressed mood and immediately sensed the situation. I felt inside, "How dare she have her own life and pleasure while I am sitting here wondering whether or not I am going to live!" I realized, of course, that this was a mother transference, but I also knew I had to express my rage and indignation toward her. In the session I actually said she was nothing better than a whore and that the bed was still warm from the last trick she turned! I was not special to her and why were we pretending. It really didn't matter to her whether I lived or died. And even if I didn't make it, she would go on laughing and someone else would take my place. She never apologized or shamed me for my anger nor did she withdraw her attention and caring about how disappointed and desperate I felt. She became neither hurt nor defensive or annoyed with my outburst. She waited and contained the moment, trusting the depth of our contact to carry me through what I had never been able to say before. As she maintained her boundaries, I learned how to find and contain mine.

However, there was one more need which I found I must have which was probably the most important of all and that was **commitment**. I recently had an experience with a client that I had been seeing for several years. We came to a place in the therapy where it appeared that

she needed a response from me that I could not give. She needed me to be more concerned about her in a particular way. I realized that it was a way that I had not received from my own parents and yet it was a way that I felt at one time I needed to be received by my therapist. Eventually she left therapy although we both knew she was not finished, and yet it was by mutual consent.

Approximately a year later she returned to therapy and during one of the first sessions said, "You let me go. You probably were even glad I went because I was making you feel uncomfortable. You didn't fight for us!" I knew exactly what she was talking about. I had felt helpless to respond in the way she needed, and even said to her that I was not that kind of therapist and could not provide the concern and attention that she needed. I was uncomfortable and resentful that she was exposing my limitations. "Yes," I acknowledged, "I did let you go. I did not fight for us."

As soon as I acknowledged my lack of commitment to our process, I knew what it felt like to be my mother. I was responding to her the way I felt my mother responded to me but never admitted it. My client then let out a terrible, agonizing cry and broke into deep sobs. She kept repeating, "You let me go." Her cry was mine. Her broken hearted lament was what I had not completed in myself because of my own anger at being let go. I was stunned, for I was listening to my cry coming from my client. I now had to face how she would feel toward me and how I would respond to her.

I reached out my hand to her and it reminded me of how my mother had reached out her hand to me while she was in the hospital dying. I also remembered how I could not take it but walked out of the room full of rage at the meaninglessness of it all. I was now my mother reaching and my client was me. Unlike me with my mother, my client took my hand and I held her while we both cried. I knew I had not been committed to our relationship and she suffered from that. I had to let go of the rage toward my mother that had kept me from being committed to my client. I knew what it felt like to be forgiven and I wished I could have had another chance to take my mother's hand.

I needed someone who was committed to our relationship. Someone who could weather the storms of my rage and disappointment. Someone who never once thought that whatever happened in the therapy

could not be worked out. Someone who was committed regardless of the outcome. I needed someone who would fight for us.

In 1981 at an IIBA trainer's meeting, I confronted Al Lowen regarding the way I felt he had shamed me in training sessions. I told him that unless he publicly apologized for this behavior I would never work with him again. He apologized. Last Thursday some of my fellow trainers and I met together. One of my closest colleagues said he needed to express some of his anger toward me regarding my behavior toward him. When he finished, I said I felt like Al must have felt when I confronted him. This time I had to apologize to my friend. Each of us in this room is both the victim and the perpetrator of pain and shaming behavior.

I realize that I, as a person and therapist, cannot fulfill all of the self needs of my clients and friends, even though these are the same needs which I had with my therapist. This is where commitment comes in. Even if I cannot always meet them, I can acknowledge their right to have me available to them, not to blame them and express how sorry I am when I fail. I like what one therapist said when he commented that every therapy works for a while because the client and the therapist create a mutual way of supplying each others needs. However, what happens when it stops working is essential. Can the therapist put aside his way of doing therapy and listen to the client? Perhaps say to him, "You know I would really like to help you and in some way what I am doing isn't working. I need your help in understanding where I am missing you. Perhaps then I will be able to get back on track so our work together can be meaningful to you."

I want to underscore one point again and that is, having our needs met is not an end in itself. However, not having to fight my therapist for an affirmation of my authentic self freed me to work with her in facing the terror, pain and grief of never having had these affirmations in the first place. The Scottish analyst W.R.D. Fairbairn would say that it is necessary for the therapist to be a good enough object in order for the patient to release his or her attachment to bad objects. In Bioenergetic terms this means releasing the tension patterns in our body that have been created around our traumas with our original caretakers. If, through intense body work, our defenses are opened up and we are not met with good enough responses of the kind I have been listing, then we must find another way to affirm our weakened self. These solutions all

involve different forms of false self adaptations. Since all of our chronic muscular tensions or resistances are forms of self organization, to open up these tension patterns or break down the resistances, without providing the environment or relationships necessary for validation of the emerging self is to invite us to engage once again in a self protective pattern. And, like me, we will have had an experience and discovered for a moment a lost part of ourselves only to lose it again because it could not be sustained without being received and supported. We are all in the process of self discovery and recovery. We desperately need each other for both confrontation and forgiveness.

In conclusion, let me say that I could not bind myself together without destroying my full potential as a person. I was in desperate need of a form of therapy where I could reconnect to my body and its freedom of expression as the energetic core of my life, and have a relationship that would provide the kind of environment and responses I needed in order to support that expression of Being. For me this support meant that I needed to feel as if I were worth listening to, that someone was moved by my existence, that they could confirm in reality that I was real and that what I was experiencing was not of my own making. I needed to make contact from my most vulnerable self with someone whom I knew would not use me, but rather was committed to my life and its potential. Only then could I more fully release myself from the desperate, depressive hold that I had on myself. To be open without these conditions would mean that I would simply reorganize myself around the needs of the therapist or his system of belief, as I did with my parents, or adapt myself to the needs of others so they would accept me. Otherwise I would be lost forever trying to get others to love me and end up only being traumatized and left as if I did not exist.

Once I found this kind of therapy, therapist and environment, I discovered that my recovery was still not complete. I now had to face daily the limitations of my self expression that years of muscular tensions and conditioning placed on me. I needed to continue to open up my psychic wounds and to find the relief that would come from my deepest sobs. However, I now had a secure basis from which to do this and to move out into the world. Dare I let others see who I really am? I knew I could not continue growing if I tried to keep these treasures just between me and my care giver therapist. My love and life must be shared if I am to be fulfilled. I had to share it in my adult life with

client, peers and those whom I love, and upon whom I depend for these precious supplies. At last I had to share it with me; to constantly surrender to the wonder and awe of my creation. To marvel at the breath that keeps me alive and the energy that renews my life daily. To share the treasure of my heart with those by whom I am moved and thereby give back the experience of grace that I had received. I now began to experience the revival of the true potential of my psyche/soma soul. With the help of my friends and loved ones, I am now daily recovering what I had so long ago known, lost and rediscovered.

It has been the greatest journey of my life to have found in Bioenergetic Analysis a means of self discovery, and in my relationships with others the means of recovering and sustaining what I have found. Such recovery is unending for it always leads to another beginning. As T.S. Eliot says, in his poem "Little Gidding," which is part of his *Four Quartets*,

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning.¹

REFERENCES

- ¹ Eliot, T.S. 1952. *The Complete Poems and Plays*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co.