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BIOENERGETICS: A WAY OF PASSION

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I have a dilemma in speaking to you this morning because I am in a passionate state. How am I to make sense to you from this place? When I have spoken to others while I am in this state I can frequently see the blank look in their eyes while they courteously wait for me to finish. Trying to tell you my story forces me to use language which is inadequate to communicate my passion. Webster's dictionary says something about passion that holds true for me today. Passion "usually implies a strong emotion that has an overpowering or compelling effect, as in, 'his passions overcame his reason'."¹ I may cry, laugh or scream all of which are options for you as well.

Even with this dilemma in mind I want to say it is a pleasure for me to be here with you today, and to have this opportunity to talk with you about Bioenergetics and my journey of self discovery.

And I want to pause right now for a Bioenergetic exercise. It is to help you loosen your connections to your "Reason" and as a result allows your passionate self to be in the foreground. If any part of my presentation begins to make sense to you, intellectual sense, you may want to repeat this exercise. Please feel free to do it at any time during my presentation along with crying, laughing or screaming.

Put both feet on the floor and sit up in your chair so you can feel yourself sitting squarely on your ass, or as Dr. Lowen would say, "sit in your ass." Loosen your jaw. Now take a few deep breaths. Now begin by turning your head slowly to the left, then slowly back to the right. Keep your breathing open, making a sound may help you do this. Now begin to speed up the turning. Continue until you begin to feel some dizziness. Then slow down and stop.

For me Bioenergetics is a passionate therapy. My truth, our truth, is in our bodies -- bodies full of feeling, expressed and unexpressed. I have "tried" to know what my truth is by learning about my character and through "body work." I have been "trying" to know and failing.

This is best expressed for me in a poem by Jalaluddin Rumi, the 13th century mystical poet:

*This piece of food cannot be eaten nor this bit of
wisdom found by looking.
There is a secret core in everyone
not even Gabriel can know by trying to know.²*

The reading of character in Bioenergetic therapy suggests that I can know myself by learning about character, energy, facial expressions, etc. I have grasped at these ways of knowing and participated in a delusion. My "trying" to know has kept me from my secret core. Still, I have experienced Bioenergetics as a process of preparation; despite my trying it has made it possible for me to embrace my aliveness.

I am going to tell you some of my life story because I believe it demonstrates the futility of trying, yet shows the unmistakable value of Bioenergetics as a way to aliveness. I will start by telling you that the death of my son Steven six years ago changed me in ways that nothing else had. The pit of grief that I fell into was actually a fall into grace. However, it has taken me most of these last six years to see and feel the grace. This, I hope, will become apparent as I continue. When I am in my passion I have no perspective, no way to stand back with understanding. I am just in it.

The pit seemed to be bottomless. I was on a merry-go-round with depression, despair, unpredictable and uncontrollable sobbing, irritability, withdrawal, deep sadness, loss of sexual interest, a feeling of not belonging anywhere. Heaviness, like a sludge, was flowing through my veins; loss of memory, feelings of stupidity and ignorance, worthlessness, purposelessness -- so many feelings with no words to explain them. I returned to a simple tactile state of babyhood. But I could not cry out or call attention to my needs.

The death of my son and the loss of his ongoing presence dropped me into the deepest part of my feeling life. This is the grace I mentioned. The death grip of my controlling ego was loosened by my grief. My ego had been keeping me from staying with my passionate self (with a great deal of help from my contracted body). I will quote Rumi again in my effort to make this more understandable. "The way of love is not a subtle argument./ The door there is devastation./ Birds make great sky-circles of their freedom/ How do they learn it./ They fall, and falling, they're given wings."³ If you dare to love (which is out of

the control of our will -- Ego) you may experience the grace but you have to embrace the devastation. How do those birds do it? Make great sky-circles of their freedom? They fall and in falling they are given wings. There it is. It is all about falling -- in love or in grief. Either way, the door is there to devastation. Yet it is the way -- to be like the birds who make great sky-circles of their freedom. You can't **really** "let go" any more than you can "fall in love," no matter how much you "try." But, as Dr. Lowen said on Monday morning, you have to try in order to fail. But saying "let go" or "fall in love" seems to imply that you **can do it**. Come on now, "just let go." It is out of our control. The way of love is **not** a subtle argument, in fact, it's not an argument at all. Loving and grieving are about falling and not about deciding to fall. We can work Bioenergetically on those aspects of ourselves that reduce our aliveness. This is the preparation I want to talk to you about.

I separate my Bioenergetic journey into two very different periods, defined by 22 years of preparation, and these last six years of unmistakable devastation. It is not that I did not have passion before my son died, but I was unable to sustain an ongoing visceral connection to it. In my years of preparation, I was mostly longing for the depth of feeling that seemed beyond the reach of my sad eyes and demanding personality. I wanted so much more life but I was full of fear and anger.

That pure overwhelming grief broke a key defense in me -- my defense against my reaching, my longing. That defense and how I played it out are now more obvious to me. I needed my son and I still long for him now. My connection with him, my need for him, came slowly and silently over 26 years, outside of my awareness. It came unannounced and so slipped under my well-established defense system. I had learned too early in my life that to be open and aware of my longing was too dangerous. Repeated disappointment became unbearable. So I learned to deny it, cover it up, and change it into "therapeutic concern for others." Before Stephen's death I was twisting my unexpressed need into seeming concern for others -- my family, friends, colleagues, and my clients. I isolated myself from others, which prevented me from the possibility of getting what I needed. The real tragedy happened when the other person risked reaching to me. I became condescending and resentful underneath a mask of caring. This left me profoundly dissatisfied, which only served to make me more demanding. What insanity! I seem to be focused on the other person.

What I was really doing was defending myself against my own sweet need. Steve's death destroyed the denial of my wanting. I was suddenly without a defense against my deep and ever present longing.

This seems a good time to express my deep gratitude for my Bioenergetic experience because it prepared me to live my grief and to be in the present with my longing. Since my son's death I have been in an ocean of passion beyond any passion I have experienced before. Each day I find myself living through the deeply felt outpouring of my emotions. The waves of grief today are not as overwhelming as they were six years ago, but they still come as surely as my next breath. After six years on the high seas of grief, I can say a heart felt thank you to each of my Bioenergetic therapists: Bob Hilton, Renato Monaco and Al Lowen, for all my bodily preparation that has allowed me to stay open hearted while grieving.

It is a special pleasure for me to precede Bob as a speaker today because I get this chance to tell you something of our life-changing relationship. My relationship with Bob actually began in 1966 at a Baptist Seminary in Southern California. He was my preaching instructor -- an irony that will be more apparent by the end of this presentation! Bob left the Seminary to follow his personal search before I graduated, but the connection between us was to be pivotal in my life as a Bioenergetic therapist and trainer. So if this presentation seems more like a sermon than anything else, you will know where my speaking education began and ended! I can only say to you that preaching as a form of public speaking is a passionate one. And today, in my passion, you may experience yourself as my Sunday morning congregation, hearing a sermon on two of my passions: Bioenergetics and Rumi!

Bioenergetic therapy has made it possible for me to live a more passionate life. The noted scientist Louis Pasteur once said, "Chance favors the prepared mind."⁴ Chance, opportunity, life, fate, destiny, whatever you call it, he was talking about his scientific search and why he saw things that others did not. He was prepared to see what chance brought to him. In the same spirit, I would say that, "Life favors the prepared body." Bioenergetic therapy prepares **our feeling body** to move more gracefully with what life throws at us. I credit my Bioenergetic therapy for preparing my heart and soul for the depth of passion and heart satisfaction that I feel today.

Why is Bioenergetics a way of passion? Because through the body work we reclaim the pulsations of held feeling. We endeavor to open up blocked pathways in the body so that we can find our graceful body and spirit. These pathways have been lost, to one degree or another, by our confining adjustments to life experiences. This therapy prepares us to embrace the passions that, as humans, are out of our control -- joy, fear, anger, love, and grief.

As an opening to his book *Bioenergetics*, Dr. Lowen used this quote from Nikos Kazantzakis', *Report to Greco*:

Three kinds of souls, three prayers:

I am a bow in your hands, Lord.

Draw me, lest I rot.

Do not overdraw me, Lord, I shall break.

Overdraw me, Lord, and who cares if I break.⁵

When I first read this quote, I thought confidently, "Oh, yes, the third prayer is my prayer" -- "*Overdraw me, Lord, and who cares if I break.*" But in my sophomoric way, I was not, as the saying goes, "being careful about what I ask for."

Looking at my beginnings in Bioenergetic therapy I was, in effect, praying the first prayer -- "*I am a bow in your hands, Lord. Draw me, lest I rot.*" I wanted to express the life in me. I wanted the quality of life I saw in Dr. Lowen when I met him, for the first time in 1969, at a lecture at the International University in San Diego, California. I was in therapy at that time with Bob Hilton, and it was not long before I was praying the second prayer -- "*Do not overdraw me, Lord, I shall break.*" As with many of us in Bioenergetics, I did not pray it out loud, even when I was over the stool, in the bow, or in some other seemingly torturous but enlivening posture. I did not dare show how close I was to breaking. Showing such weakness was "unthinkable" at the time, even though I did break down and cry from time to time. And even though I softened my deep, dense muscular holding, I could not "let go." I was literally afraid of breaking physically and emotionally. Still I continued this therapy.

In my therapy with Renato I felt seen and understood because of our common characterological issues. He worked me energetically with the ruthlessness that only the truly masochistic therapist can manage -- maybe even sadistically at times. He was able to place me in postures

that made me face my skilled avoidance of being at my physical limits. He did this with verve that seemed to lack a normal human aversion to suffering. However, he understood that the way to freedom was through experiencing and expressing the suffering held in my body.

This was definitely the right path for me because I could "take it." I could fall. I could yell. I could cry until I could not speak. I **thought** I understood the simple similes and metaphors that Dr. Lowen was teaching us. Falling exercises to explore letting go, falling asleep, falling in love, falling on your face, ass or head. I could reach with my arms, eyes, lips and genitals. I could break down, give up, give in, cry fall; at least I **thought** I could. I could make these **simple** connections but I also felt the repeated conflict in letting go physically, mentally and emotionally. I **thought** this would change me and bring me more life, and it did in incremental ways.

I had many stunning experiences in therapy that were new to me and this was the life I had longed for. I felt alive and vital in my therapy. There was often more life in those hours than the hours outside. As a result, one of the errors I made was mistaking Bioenergetic therapy for my life. Dr. Lowen might say you can see life in the body, but therapy is not your life.

I know that learning often comes from immersing ourselves in the process. When I was in college my brother would say about me, "We sent him to school to learn and he ate the books." A telling story and it is true. I tend to do things "whole hog." I attended every workshop I could afford. I was fervent about my therapy, first with Bob then with Renato Monaco, as well as with Dr. Lowen, an intermittent but still ever present guide. I was just as dedicated to my training experience.

As you all know, some of the goals in Bioenergetic therapy are to break down, give up, give in, and I did break, in a way, and stayed that way for many years, financially broke. I believe many of you here know this broken experience. I did this out of my desire for more aliveness. The training and the books that "I ate" continue to be deeply important to me and I have no regrets. I believe that we all need a community of humans deeply committed to claiming their passion for life. My relationships here have been, and still are, passionate ones. As a community we are drawn to this fire and its life in the face of inevitable conflict. This has certainly been true for me. We are a passionate community and thirsting for more.

Again, Bioenergetic therapy is about preparation. Preparation of the body and spirit to more deeply experience the life in us. It supports the pulsations of life in order that they may pass through us -- so that our tears do not get stuck in our throat; the fear in our chest and eyes; and so that our anger does not harden our eyes and hearts. We come to therapy with mental, physical and emotional blocks to these passions. The opening of these impediments is preparation for our passion to be in us and to move us -- so that we will be able to burst onto the field of play rather than sitting on the sidelines waiting for the coach to call our name -- to jump onto the field of play rather than suffer and complain about anxieties and our fear of failing. This is a difficult understanding to elucidate because, without the experience, the words that describe it have so little meaning. I tried to capture this paradox in a poem I wrote last summer after some work with Dr. Lowen.

Loving you is terrifying.

I have been afraid of heights since I was little

*Now when I feel the fear I walk to the edge of the cliff
and throw myself off.*

What is it that wells up in us, and takes away the holding back, if not passion? Why would we throw ourselves off the cliff, especially in the face of our profound terrors? For love, you say? Yes, probably most of us have done this, but then again, how many times do we "hit the rocks" of despair before we heed our life-long fears? Not many. Life seems to teach us, through injury, to protect ourselves from our passion as if it were a poison. But is this holding back really the life we want? I don't think so. At least I don't want it; however, the fear is formidable. Most often, we just remain in the paradox -- between life and deadness. Alive yes! Feeling yes! But not so passionate.

In a paradoxical poem by Rumi, he points this out:

You suffer, but not enough to die.

Your ship will not sink,

until you put the last sixteen pound stone

In it.

That last stone

is the piercing star that comes up at night and makes you act.⁶

We suffer but not enough to let go. It takes the sinking of our ship, **dying**, for us to act. In Bioenergetics I have gone over the stool, over and over again, looking for that last stone. But my personal lesson is that **life brings the stones**. Bioenergetic therapy prepares us to more fully experience our dying, to risk again throwing ourselves over the cliffs of love, of grief, of despair -- to fall. The body work is about breaking the holding on, holding back and holding up. But because we can't understand what it is like on the other side we continue the endless holding.

Stanley Keleman wrote simply, "Can you imagine Jesus on the cross **Dying full of life?**"⁷ In *Fear of Life*, Dr. Lowen is really asking us to **imagine living our lives full of passion**.⁸

Bioenergetic preparation is incremental -- small explorations -- a little breathing, a little movement. To me, however, Bioenergetic stress positions and expressive activities never felt like a little of anything. They always seemed like the extreme edge of passion for me because the body work stretched my physical boundaries and challenged my emotional limits. Yet, as big as I am, I was only living in my small world, while heading for the ocean.

Coleman Barks, in a parable on this theme, tells about the ocean frog and the ditch frog. "There was once a frog from the ocean who came to visit a frog who lived in a little ditch, three feet by four feet by two feet. After the little ditch frog jumped down into the ditch, swam across, and went up the other side, he said to the ocean frog, 'How do you like that? Isn't that something? What is it like where you live?' and the ocean frog said, 'I couldn't tell you. You have to go there. I'll take you there someday.'"⁹

Dr. Lowen has been leading me/us to the ocean. The feelings that emerged from my body work kept giving me a "whiff of the sea breeze" which inspired my longing to go there. The body work was preparing me for ocean life; to breathe while under the water of despair or riding a tidal wave of joy. How can a ditch frog understand the ocean? He can't! He holds his breath when he goes from one side of his ditch to the other and then proclaims a great feat. Nevertheless, I kept breathing over the stool and kicking in preparation.

Now its 1969. I have just graduated from a Baptist Seminary and begun Bioenergetic therapy with Bob Hilton. I am married and have two children. My wife and I have just lost a third child, Thomas, who

only lived for two months. I have work in a church in Southwest Los Angeles. Sunnyside Church is in a black neighborhood and poor. Both Bill, my associate minister, and I hold down social work jobs full time and do the church work "full time" as well. My life was full of grief, confusion, anxiety, fear, denied anger, love, sex and conflict. It was timely to begin Bioenergetics. As if all this weren't enough, I am also struggling, with little success, with the meaning and purpose of life for me. Going to seminary was a big part of my search for meaning. I was trying to understand life from both a psychological perspective and from a Christian religious tradition. I was then, and am now, a work in progress in a never-ending process.

At that time the understanding of the passion of life that I found in my therapy with Bob and in Dr. Lowen's writings touched me profoundly. Because of this, I idealized both men more than I could know at the time. And, in time, they both fell from that state of grace. This is a curse, or at best a mixed blessing, accompanying the raising of children, of being a teacher and especially of being a therapist. As Rumi put it, "I never taught archery to anyone who in the end did not use me as a target."¹⁰ But that positive transference enabled me to risk being more open in the body work which was a profound blessing. And as surely as there is a positive transference, negative transference is soon to follow. Reich said that the therapy does not begin until the negative transference emerges.¹¹ Well, I believe that is so, and my therapy had begun.

Living in my moral dilemmas had been an ongoing process so when I read *Depression and the Body*, I was particularly moved by a section near the end of the book in which Dr. Lowen wrote that the basis of morality comes from the body and distortions of morality reflects the holding in the body.¹² This idea made complete sense to me even though I could not fully understand it. Although I lacked the understanding, it became my desire to open up to a deeper sense of myself. I began Bioenergetic therapy to gain the sensations of my moral sensibilities rather than just following rules, as with the Ten Commandments. Without that sensory connection I was lost.

My interest in psychology and religion were about trying to understand my own moral sense. My religious experience was a mystical one, and the mystery seemed to me about God and humanity, good and evil, right and wrong, saints and sinners.

I had questions like: Is there a God? If so, what does He want? And more particularly, what does He want from me? In my religious tradition, God was a personal God and I had his 800 number. I could pray to him at any time, but getting the return message was the problem. He didn't leave me messages on my answering machine.

I left the church work in 1972 because, as a minister, I thought I was supposed to know the answers to these questions, and I **did not**. My personal search was still in the beginning stages. And, despite leaving the church environment, I was still seeing the words from my Christian heritage -- black or white, good or bad, right wrong. This understandably distorted my perspective on life for some time to come. But Bioenergetic therapy was wearing down this "good and bad" perspective like a river of water on stone.

On one of Dr. Lowen's visits to Southern California (about 1973) something shifted in me; it was deep beneath my upper crust. It began in one of our training workshops. There were always thirty or thirty-five participants in these workshops and people were often reluctant to volunteer to work with him. But I always saw it as an opportunity to "get my money's worth." On this particular occasion, I got more than my money's worth! Dr. Lowen had me over the stool, my hands gripping a chair back, while I bounced my ass, and yelled, "NO!" This is a familiar exercise to most of you I'm sure. Even though it may be a universal exercise, it also happens to be direct work on my character and captive spirit. He gave simple and clear directions, and I tried to follow them.

After a few minutes, I stopped, exhausted, and I melted onto the floor. Dr. Lowen asked if anyone would like to touch me. There was a pause and a woman came over near me and put her hands on me. Initially this felt good. Then she progressively laid down on top of me. I waited a few moments and pushed her off. She would not depart. In fact, she kept trying to get back on top of me. The next thing I knew I was standing and pushing her away. She kept coming until I pushed her down on top of some stunned participants. I was threatening her, all the while screaming as a mad man.

Finally I turned to Dr. Lowen and said, "Why didn't you do something?" I began to cry and collapse to the floor. He reached over to me. He took hold of my right bicep and gently kept me standing.

Then he said, "If you had hit her, you would not have had to threaten her so much."

That was like a sock between my eyes. A loud gasp came from the group. It was not a direction to hit her, as I know they imagined. He spoke to my internal barriers that were preventing me from being believable and being able to stand for myself. I understood his meaning. This was the "something that had shifted." With this awareness, I thought now it might be possible for me to feel my inner truth and speak simply and clearly from that knowing. If I could do that I would not only be believable but convincing.

His comment cut through my fear and despair. I felt him as a voice inside of me, not outside of me. I did not hear judgement or correction as I so often do. This, in combination with his firm touch and clear voice, enabled me to understand. This began a very deep work for me.

Moreover, it established Dr. Lowen as a unique person for me, one who could see beyond superficial observations and touch me deeply. He had allowed my emotional expressions to flow without interruption. As a result I received more than I can recount to you. To be so present with my passion in those moments -- what a gift I received! And beyond that, it anchored me on my path of preparation. This work with my body was bringing my spirit to life and the two did not know much about relating to each other. I was beginning my preparation to be more alive. My personal direction became clearer but I was full of fear and only aware of one of its offspring, anger. Much of my early therapy revolved around discharging anger so that I could feel my long standing fears. I thought "I can do this." This delusion continued, but I kicked, I hit, I yelled and I felt better.

So began my struggle, in a Bioenergetic way, between doing and being. Like learning dance steps, it begins with awkward, self-conscious tripping until the movement is without thought and you move gracefully to the music. But because this is still preparation, a single thought, "doubt" can overtake the truth of the body's deeply felt reality and, as with dancing, when you think about the next step, it is too late -- you are out of step with the music. These moments of grace would be mine on many occasions, but they were not yet mine to sustain. I could hear music but my thinking kept breaking the connection with my spontaneous life. I continued to practice regularly over the stool, breaking the holding through breathing deeper and

deeper, again and again. The stool has become my "friend," my dance partner.

In the years since that early experience with Dr. Lowen, I have continued my therapy. But as is the goal of preparation, I took over the ongoing process of my body work within the support of the Bioenergetic community. This was my community and as Rumi advised:

*The prophets all were commanded
to stay in the company of lovers.
We take warmth from fire, but fire
goes out in the presence of ashes*¹³

In this community I was "staying in the company of lovers." I continued practicing to the music of my breathing and to the rhythm of the tennis racket. I raised two children, worked hard, and enjoyed my life within my capacities. I became an International Trainer in 1978 and, along with Ben Shapiro, began the Pacific Northwest Bioenergetic Conference in 1982. I have enjoyed teaching in many training groups within our International Community, and I have maintained a private therapy practice during these years.

Again, when I think about my experience in Bioenergetic therapy it is, and has been, profoundly passionate. The focus of Bioenergetic work is the body. This focus does not separate the head from the body, though many look at our physical work and interpret it as exercise for the body, not the head. Opening the paths of feeling in the body leads us to new understandings which promotes unity of head and heart. In an interesting new book, *Emotional Intelligence*, David Goleman clearly describes and validates this connection between head and heart.¹⁴ And, God knows, we are always looking for validation. I recommend it to you.

However, Rumi says, "Thinking gives off smoke to prove the existence of fire. The mystic sits within the burning."¹³ This unity between head and body is a basic tenet in Bioenergetic work. So, as with the mystic we, too, some of the time prefer to "sit within the burning."

All that I have described to you so far of my Bioenergetic experience I count only as preparation for what was to come next in my life. As I said earlier, in 1990 my 26 year old son and his new wife were killed in an auto accident. My son's death broke me like a wave crashing against the rocks. I was submerged in the grief, and I had to

learn to swim emotionally all over again. While drowning in my grief I focused on staying alive while drowning. I lived with the paradoxes of breathing while in a flood of despair, feeling dead but waking each morning, feeling dysfunctional but facing the tasks of the living. I was broken. I had fallen and I could not get back up into my head. This has been my passionate state. In my grief my passion truly "overcame my reason."

Since that experience I have been wandering like a nomad, feeling unreasonable and emotionally open to whatever comes into my life. I read Rumi's poetry -- as a friend of mine observed, "comforting myself." This is true, but it also helps to keep me focused on my body and stay in the present.

Bioenergetics is a way of passion. It has given me back my body, a container full of wisdom with enough experiences to enable me to go crazy -- with grief, love, fear and joy. Therapy in general is often a way to "make a better life," but I believe we enter Bioenergetic therapy to recover the lost passion of our being; this is not a **reasonable** activity.

So, here I am, following this way of passion. Today I am laughing at myself as I look back over my years in Bioenergetics. The irony is many sided. With a short story I will end my presentation, this sharing with you.

I was visiting Bob in California about two months ago. We were going to lunch on the last day of my visit. I was talking to him, my old preaching instructor, my therapist, my teacher, my friend and in listening to me he said, "Yes Jim, your grief destroyed you." I differed with him in the moment, as is often my style. He did not argue with me but just let his comment stand undefended, unmodified. Upon reflection I first felt, and then could see, the simple truth of what Bob had said to me -- that in my son's death, I was destroyed. Whoever I had been died, and through grieving I had been resurrected in a passionate ocean of tears. So the irony is complete, this paradox transparent. Having come full circle, I sit with this man who helped me start on my path. I idealized him, hated him, I love him.

When Bob and I were talking it was Easter time, the time of resurrection. I am in this car with this man who sees me in ways I cannot see myself. **But now I am prepared to be myself.** I came to Bioenergetics from a religious tradition to find my true spirituality in my body. Many therapies are designed to help you learn to adjust to life

and regain a livable routine in order to live with reality. For me, Bioenergetics is not about these things. It is about discovering yourself and living your passion. It is not a religion despite my best effort to make it one. It is however, **a way of passion.**

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