

Newsletter Presenting Issue 34: A Deeper Look at Fear - Part I

Jack in Japan: *In this issue of Presenting I am exploring the problem of fear as it is revealed in the body. I have come to the conclusion that touch therapists need to deal with a deeper aspect of what is happening inside the minds of ourselves and our clients that causes most of the suffering we experience: fear. In the next issue I will further explore this subject with evidence of the signs and symptoms of fear. In this issue I am laying the groundwork for why fear is so closely attached to our body experiences and why we are continually obsessed with thoughts of comparison and judgment. These thoughts obsess practitioners as well as clients. What we call transference is more basically driven by a fearful need to assess where we stand in terms of the rewards and punishments we ascribe to life. My interests are in why bringing our minds into presence relieves the fear, relieves the physical symptoms, and enriches our life choices. How can we find ways as professionals to establish modes of therapy that relieve the predicament of mental projections and fears? I have also re-listed the seminar and class on fear I'm co-teaching with Deane Juhan in early April.*

Feeling: In the 1980s when I started as a bodyworker working at Rosario Resort on Orcas Island I questioned what I was working on in person's bodies. I understood that connective tissue and joints could tighten because of past trauma. I noticed that when clients felt into their bodies the tissue started to change no matter what technique I was using on that body part. I was experimenting with Trager, Reiki, cranio sacral, and aromatherapy in various combinations.

Vipassana: Prior to learning bodywork I had practiced vipassana meditation for 4 years. I had learned in my own body that if I kept scanning the sensations up and down my body that I would enter a state of awareness where I could watch my thoughts and notice the effects they produced in my body. At that point I was interested in finding an entrance to nirvana, a state of bliss and expanded consciousness. Later I realized that some of the side effects of the meditation were much more important than reaching enlightenment.

Observation: As I watched my mind I started to notice that it was operating like a radio... rarely stopping, changing subjects randomly, and almost completely dwelling on the past and the future as a replay of the past. As the subjects would change, my body would change. Emotional memories seemed to have the greatest effects on my body... but most surprising to me was to feel a steady state of fear underneath much of the thoughts and emotions.

Basic presence: What I started to experiment with was to bring my clients into a self-observant state at the beginning of the sessions so that they would continue to track their bodies throughout the sessions. I taught them how to come in and sample their sensations with their inhalation and then release that experience with their outbreath. I reasoned that their mind could operate just like their breaths; each in-breath would be a new sampling of their body whereas each outbreath was a letting go of the past.

Shifting fear: As clients would practice that breath-awareness they would experience many of the states I had achieved in vipassana meditation: stillness, peacefulness, no thought, inner quiet. I would especially remind clients to keep up this breath practice when I was working on a body part where they were experiencing symptoms. It didn't seem to matter how severe the symptoms were; when clients maintained this practice their symptoms would change for the better. Even more interesting was that they would universally change from sympathetic to parasympathetic body states. I began to ask myself whether what I was really working on were the effects on the body of a fearful mental state.

Frozen minds: Dr. Trager said over and over: "We are always working on the mind of the client." What he didn't say but what I was noticing is that almost everyone who had frozen bodies had minds that were frozen in fear. Their thoughts that were frozen in projections from the past, and their beliefs were frozen in some kind of blame-game. Our mental penchant to overlay everything with past memories makes it impossible to perceive anything or anyone without the mental fog of judgment and comparison.

Fearful thoughts: Underlying our mental preoccupation with the past is fear. "Did I say the wrong thing; What time were we meeting; I should have come straight home; Has he accomplished more than I did; When did this stiffness begin; Did I cause the accident; When will this trouble be over?" When we are still for awhile and watch our thoughts we start to realize the continual fearful state they produce. I could feel that fearful state in my client's bodies. What seemed to be pain and tightness and negative emotional states, that I considered the targets of the sessions, were all coming from the client's mind and mine as well.

Projections: I say my mind because I became aware of how much I was overlaying the client's story with stories derived from my own past. I began to realize that in my nascent attempts to give my clients some tools I had learned in vipassana, I was opening the door to something far more important than symptomatic relief. I had unconsciously uncovered the importance of sharing presence in ridding the client's mind and mine from past projections. Many profound healings and spiritual shifts were taking place in my sessions. I wanted a better understanding of what was happening.

Theological question: I wound up in graduate school looking for a way to context these experiences within spiritual tradition. One of my professors was a Jesuit priest. He understood that I was very drawn to what is called "Creation Spirituality." I had confessed to him that I was not a Christian and that I could not understand why the church had deviated so much from the teachings of Jesus. He said that those who were so focused upon the basic goodness of creation and of Jesus' teachings had not dealt with the "problem of evil." In other words we were overlooking the fact that evil exists.

Struggle: I took his words as a challenge to myself to try to understand where body symptoms came from and what they meant. I wrote a paper for him called "Fear No Evil," based on the sermons of Meister Eckhart. I came to the conclusion that our minds are spellbound by thoughts of good and evil, and much of those are directly projected on the body. We are drawn to the rush or excitement of fear. We have captivated ourselves with fearful or sympathetic feeling states. They are evidence of that life involves ongoing struggle, evidence of the importance of winning or losing, and our preoccupation with punishment and reward for our actions.

Body blame: In my sessions I could witness the effects of these beliefs as they are projected onto our bodies. Most persons who are suffering from illness see their suffering as evidence that belief in reward and punishment is real. And here was the underlying reason for what I had witnessed as frozen fear in the body.

Like Job, we reason that we have done something wrong to merit the punishment we are experiencing, or something wrong is being done to us; hence our judgments and comparisons and search for a formula for avoiding suffering.

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