

Draft of Work in Progress:
**Nervous System Energy Work in Gestalt Body Process
Psychotherapy**

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Introduction

I have been a body-oriented psychotherapist for 27 years. Having originally trained in a combination of deep-tissue body work and Gestalt (Lomi Body Work), over the years I learned techniques and ways of practicing which I felt I could integrate into a more articulated Gestalt understanding and theory. I felt that the body orientation and practice of traditional Gestalt therapy was a good starting place, but not a true body-psychotherapy, which was my own goal and passion---and need I might add, since I was not very embodied myself at the time! This culminated in my book *Body Process* (Kepner 1987/1991) which attempted to bring Gestalt therapy practice and theory into a true and full body psychotherapy, not just a “body friendly” or body inclusive verbal therapy.

The task of bringing clients more into their bodily experience was often a daunting one, despite all the exercises, body work, and artistry I was able to bring to developing embodied language and experiment. The degree of numbness and disconnection could be profound for many clients, even for those with the so-called more “normal” problems. As I will comment later, the dominant practices within body therapy methods of the day were (and continue to be) predominantly focused on the *muscular* system. Thus movement, physical exercises, physical loosening work, breathing, and the like were the tools of choice in trying to generate more body awareness, embodied connection and access to bodily experience. They were slow. They were either not enough to make a difference or were so intense that they were flooding and difficult to integrate. They didn’t “stick” well. They simply were not enough. There seemed to me to be something missing.

Along the way, I learned more about subtle energy methods, particularly energy healing approaches that work with the chakra system, the energy bodies, and the flow of energy through physical tissue. As a body oriented therapist I was particularly fortunate to have as my teacher Rev. Rosalyn Bruyere, as she insisted that this work, and her students, be well grounded in the physical body. It was not sufficient for her that we change energy flow or work in the energy bodies, the energy had to penetrate and affect physical tissue, and become palpable to the client. Energy work became a compatible hands-on intervention source that integrated well into my GBPP work. It was subtle enough to be useful for easily flooded clients, such as abuse survivors, but supported sensation and connection in the body which helped more muscular methods be integrated well. But it was slow, and often it’s effects, in terms of body sensation and awareness, attenuated rapidly after a session. It didn’t always stick or accumulate.

In addition to being fortunate to find Rosalyn as a teacher, I was also greatly fortunate to find Carol DeSanto as a colleague, fellow learner, dharma buddy, and eventual partner in teaching. Carol was also a Gestalt trained psychotherapist and, while not specifically a body psychotherapist, was greatly

interested in integrating the energetic work with Gestalt psychotherapeutic aims. This common interest led us eventually to formulating a work we call *Nervous System Energy Work (NSEW)* which will be described in this article, and has been written about elsewhere (Kepner 2005, also see www.pathwaysforhealing.com).

It was with the specificity of subtle energy work through the human nervous system, the approach of *NSEW*, that I finally felt I'd found a body intervention method which could create palpable and lasting access to body sensation. It also helped me to understand that awareness is not just a subjective experience but also a tangible energetic phenomenon, as well as to understand how experience and body memory is stored and accessed through the peripheral nervous system. *NSEW* also has contributed enormously helpful methods for diminishing trauma responses, and given a practical way of working with health and emotional issues. It also has profound implications for understanding and developing expanded, embodied, spiritual consciousness. How's that for a teaser?

In the following, I'd like to set the context in the viewpoint of body psychotherapy in general, and Gestalt Body Process Psychotherapy (*GBPP*) in particular, presenting the orientation towards awareness and embodiment in this approach. Then I will offer a brief critique of muscular modes of intervention, trying to show their limitations in terms of generating lasting awareness. Then I will introduce Nervous System Energy Work, and some accompanying observations about awareness as an energetic phenomenon, and the difference between awareness of the body and awareness in the body, on this basis. Finally, I will present a more detailed discussion of the way in which energetic access to different parts of our nervous system generates different qualities of self-experience, and how this contributes to sense of identity, character and emotional access.

Body Psychotherapy

Body-oriented Psychotherapy's (BP's) understand bodily experience and process as integral to self-experience and process. Although once considered "fringe therapy" by more mentalistic mainstream psychotherapy, the mainstream has increasingly absorbed and made "usual and customary" many elements derived from BP such as attention to non-verbal experience, focus on posture and micro-movements, attention to body experience in affect and its suppression, an appreciation of body memory especially in the field of trauma work, and sensorimotor ways of working with body memories (Levine). At the same time, the increase in neuropsychological data from the hard sciences has drawn psychotherapy's attention to the way in which psychological processes are underpinned by neurological, humoral, and physiological events (Schore). All this is to say that BP is seen as an increasingly legitimate mode of psychotherapy.ⁱ

Gestalt Body Process Psychotherapy

My own BP practice is called *Gestalt Body Process Psychotherapy (GBPP)*, an extension of Gestalt therapy principles into a more specific body-oriented approach (Kepner 1987, touch article, etc). *GBPP*, like Gestalt therapy itself, is very much an *awareness based* psychotherapy approach. That is:

- There is a particular emphasis on working with present awareness of bodily sensation and experience,
- Increasing the client's capacity to sense and feel their own bodily process and experience,
- Using their bodily awareness to discover and integrate that which has been dis-integrated from the self-as-a-whole.

To this purpose, we use somatic means— such as movement, attention to body sensation and experience, breathing work, and various forms of hands-on intervention— to work towards psychological ends.

Now, in any awareness based approach a key question becomes:

How can we facilitate and increase the clients access their bodily experience?

Answering this requires a clearer sense of what body sensation and awareness involves.

Ability to sense one's body

One issue is simply the *overall ability* that the client has, to sense their own body sensation with adequate detail and subtlety, so as to include this in how they make meaning. In Gestalt therapy we call this the formation of meaningful figures of awareness, that is, awareness which organizes our energy, our activity, our contact with others, and the capacity to satisfy our human needs. From a body psychotherapists perspective, whatever bodily awareness is accessible or not accessible, predominant or missing from our figure formation, will greatly shape our contact and our sense of who we are. Put another way, you can't organize your behavior and contact around anything you are not capable of sensing in your body.

Experienced body psychotherapists commonly note that the vast majority of clients have a remarkably low level of awareness of their body sensation overall. In Western culture, by in large, most people coming to psychotherapy have heightened awareness of their face and head regions of the body, and often little else other than body symptoms, such as tension, anxiety, pains, and so on. This means that, for these people, the bodily "self" (identified bodily "me") is their head, including their facial expression (emotional display) and their cognitions. Symptoms, while technically aware, are experienced as "coming from below" not as coming from oneself. The "self" or identified "I" is *subject to them* (the symptoms) rather than experienced as generating them, because all the

identified awareness is located in the head, not where the symptoms are actually generating from in the body.

In addition, most people are more able to sense, to one degree or another, of their muscular system or parts of it. Our muscular system generates strong sensation simply by moving, and so many people can most readily experience and identify themselves as movers, actors, engaged-in-the-world. In Western society, where thinking is highly valued, locating most of one's experience in the head where the organs of sight and hearing are, and identifying with the sensation of thinking (ie talking to oneself or making inner pictures which is based on these sensory capacities) makes the head the locus of self.

Of course, there are those folks who have a lot of visceral-emotional sensation or autonomic nervous system stimulation, and are regularly flooded by emotional reactions and feelings. Most often, this is a *problematic* condition, where they either over-identify with the feelings they are subject too, as in borderline personality disorder, or feel taken over by feelings they do not wish to identify with, as is the case with traumatic re-stimulation. But these conditions are certainly not the norm, and in fact are defined as "abnormal" because they are not the modal, common state. Certainly there are non-Western cultures which value more a more visceral sense of the world and of self, but this does not guarantee that they are more in and of their embodied experience, only that visceral response is considered important.

Now, if you can't feel much of what's happening in your body you are missing a lot of critical information about your own life:

- The client's sensation may be of a fairly gross level of detail. It may be focused only on superficial aspects of embodiment, such as physical appearance, gross position in space, feeling a general outline of the body surface, and so on.
- Internal sensation, such as internal kinesthetic and, particularly, visceral sensations (which are most responsible for our sensations of emotion) are may be very little available to the client's awareness, except when sensations become so intense that they break through the limiting threshold of the client's numbness—as in anxiety or emotional breakdown.

Unfortunately, this rather superficial and limited level of body sensation is often considered "normal" in our culture and is certainly the starting point for most of us. In Gestalt terms it is "normal," but not sufficient for good self-regulation nor adequate contact in the field.

Location, Location, Location: The embodied reality of awareness-

The second issue in terms of body awareness is that there is an important difference between awareness *of* ones body experience and awareness *in* ones body. Often, to the degree that clients are aware of their body experience at all, they are most aware of sensation “from above.” That is, as if one is located in the “control tower” of the head and turning a searchlight of attention on the sensations “down there” in the “the body” (as if the head is not simply a part of the body). In this way, they do not experience their self-awareness as located *in* their body, within the places they are actually sensing and feeling. This subtle, but crucial, distinction makes a difference in body oriented therapy work.

For years it used to puzzle me that clients could give perfectly adequate reports of body sensation, but they could not organize it into it’s meaning to their person. It was because they were experiencing their sensation as happening *to* their person, not as *their-person-happening*. It is the crucial difference between experiencing “the” body, body-as-an-object, versus experiencing oneself as *embodied*. Such as the difference, between “There is some sadness there in the chest,” and “*I* am sad, deep in my heart.”

These two issues are reflected in the practical concerns of an awareness oriented body psychotherapy approach. How do we increase the client’s access to and capacity for body sensation? And, what supports the client not only to have sensation, but to feel more *in*, and *of*, their bodily life?

Related practical concerns also arise, such as:

How do we uncover and connect with feelings and experiences stored in body areas we have disconnected from or cannot access?

How is this “stored?”

How do we make meaning of body sensation?

And so on.

Rounding Up the Usual Suspects in Body Psychotherapy- the muscular system

Most body psychotherapies answer these questions by focusing on the muscular system, seeing muscular tensions as the main inhibitors of body awareness. In our legacy from Wilhelm Reich, who referred to the body armor of tense musculature as directly correlated to psychological ones defenses, the muscular system became the major locus of intervention and technique in body psychotherapy.

So most BP’s focus their practical intervention tools on fostering awareness and sensation are through muscular means, such as breathing, movement work, muscular release work, hands-on work to loosen muscles or reorganize

movement, and so on. This is true for most body psychotherapies even when the particular approach includes “energetic” principles in their theory: the energy in question is still stimulated or pumped by muscular means through the bellows of breathing and muscular discharge of emotional release. Muscular work, whether it is through movement, manipulation, breathing or release work, can eventually generate some kind of body sensation or stimulus.

Yet, over my many years of working with muscular techniques, a number of frustrations with this form of working began to accrue. Sensation and awareness was often short lived from such work. High amplitude techniques (deep tissue or gross movement expressive work) would generally create more immediate sensation and larger emotional discharge, but these were often experienced as difficult to integrate: as if disconnected from oneself, as happening *to* one, rather than as owned experiences. More subtle muscular techniques were experienced as more assimilable, but were also slow in action. The impact they had was often too subtle to make a felt difference in the client’s actual life experience, neither real physiological change, nor lasting difference in awareness was produced. It often took a kind of “practice effect” to instill change in muscular patterns, a repetition over long time periods to make a change.

Many of these muscular/breathing oriented techniques also generated an experience of energy flow, but not always in a useful way. Generating energy via high amplitude procedures (deep tissue work, mega-breathing work, etc) tends to work by flooding the clients body system with more energy charge than it can hold, and this is in fact the rationale for using it: that by flooding the “resistance” or armoring can no longer hold. But this often produces iatrogenic responses such as disorientation, anxiety, breakdown of useful ego-boundaries and so on. And if you view “resistance” as something intrinsic to the very self-functioning of the person as we do in GBPP (Kepner 1987), then these techniques are seen as breaking down something intrinsic to the person, ie their resistance *is them* not something foreign to them.

Another problem I felt with large amplitude muscular/breathing techniques is their lack of specificity. They are more broad band, more like a scattershot in their effect, and focus on gross releases of energy and tension. Although there has been a recent trend in modern body psychotherapy to use such high amplitude techniques in a more graded, sensitive and selective way, they still seem akin to me to trying to clear a blocked pond outlet by flooding the whole area with water: the block may open, but all the stable shoreline gets washed away with it! But, more subtle energy effects of lower amplitude body therapy interventions had the opposite problem, the flow of water not being enough to clear the clog!

Nervous System Energy Work: *Basic approach*

So, in addition to the muscular system, what else might support body awareness and sensation? The natural organ of awareness, sensation and the processing of

that information is of course the nervous system. Most BP's understand that movement, touch, breathing and other interventions affect, at least indirectly, the nervous system and it's organization. *But what if we had some way to more directly effect the nervous system, especially in regard to it's capacity to have increased sensation and awareness, as well as important nervous system functions such as sympathetic nervous system reactivity and so on?*

In the course of our use of subtle energy work in a body psychotherapy context, my colleague Carol DeSanto and I began to explore applying these processes directly to the human nervous system. We had been integrating more chakra based energy work into our practice from our studies with Rosalyn Bruyere for a number of years. But it was our explorations of work with nerves and the nervous system as a subtle energy system from an old-time energy healer named William (Bill) Gray which formed the basis for an energy work which would have a powerful and significant impact on body psychottherapy concerns.

Nerves as the conduits for subtle energy

Bill Gray¹ saw the nerves as wires or conduits for distributing subtle energy throughout the body. Differing from many other systems of subtle energy healing, that it is the *nervous system that is the main system for conveying subtle energy throughout the body*. In his view it is the nerves ability to convey energy that determines our health. He had little interest in chakras and meridians and such. He considered that the body tissues require an adequate supply of this subtle energy *through the nervous system* to maintain healthy functioning and that disease was caused by an inadequate supply of energy to the organs. By opening the flow of energy through the nerves that fed a diseased or distressed organ system he was apparently able to accomplish remarkable healings.

We worked to translate these this underlying concept from Bill Gray's approach into our own energy skills, and over time learned how to work energetically directly in and with the nervous system. This has grown into a sophisticated, systematic and effective system we call *Nervous System Energy Work (NSEW)*. *NSEW* is not a replica of Bill's original work, he died before he passed on his actual method, but rather has sprung from the his concepts and principles of working energetically with the nervous system translated into a modern form of energetic work.

NSEW has impacted a number of important factors relevant to body psychotherapy practice.

¹ William Gray's work was described in a popular work by author Ruth Montgomery in her book *Born to Heal*. He is named in that book as "Mr. A." There is also a small book written at his direction and under his name called *Know Your Magnetic Field*. Readers are unlikely to draw much practical sense from them as they describe little of his actual technique.

Nervous System Energy and Body Psychotherapy

If NSEW were just a set of techniques that body psychotherapists could use to enhance body awareness and open the routes of connection into embodiment, this would be certainly desirable and sufficient as an “add-on” tool for therapists. However, our work with the energetic nervous system in a body psychotherapy context has also brought it’s own distinct understanding about how our nervous system, energy flow through it, awareness, and the resulting collective self-experience all interact to form an important substrata for psychological process.

One key to this is that it is through our energetic nervous system that we have access (or not, as the case may be) to our actual, *felt-experience*, especially to our experience of the qualities of self. A second is that awareness of our experience and our sense of identification with such, is not synonymous. This has to do with the energetic quality of being *in* our experience (ie our body) by the energy-of-awareness being spread into our tissue via our nervous system that I spoke of earlier.

Our energetic nervous system is intrinsic to some very important somato-psychic processes and functions. Among them:

Energy and self-awareness, especially body awareness.

That different qualities of feeling-one’s-self are derived from different sub-systems of our nervous system being energetically available to awareness.

That our sense of identity is not just a mental construct, but is informed by the qualities of body awareness through our nervous system.

That

Nervous System Energy and Awareness

One of the most critical things which our work with the energetic nervous system has illuminated is the connection between energy flow and awareness and our experience of self.² We found that as we worked to open flow of energy through nervous system, we observed a definite increase body awareness. This effect appeared to be more or less independent of the given level of physiological functioning level of the client’s nervous system.

By this, I mean that, in an otherwise intact nervous system (no nervous system disorders or disease), *the degree of availability of the client’s nervous system to energy flow was directly correlated to the degree and acuity of their body awareness. Where in their body the client’s nervous system was less available to energy flow, they also had less awareness of body sensation there.*

As a psychotherapist looking at the ways in which a client’s body process , including affective process and experience, experience of their bodily nature

² In an earlier paper (Kepner, 20--) I elaborated on this in terms of the embodiment of consciousness through the energetic nervous system.

(embodiment), movement, embodied sense-of-self, and so on, effects and is intrinsic to the psychological concerns they are seeking help with, this observation of the link between energy flow through the nervous system and awareness was quite of interest. More specifically, we observed things such as:

- Where parts of oneself more associated with sensing certain emotional states were closed to nervous system energy, the client was also less able to access that emotional state. For example, when the client had little access energetic to autonomic nerves around their heart area, they had little ability to sense heart-felt and loving feelings.
- Where aspects of ones body associated with a particular quality of self were more available through the nervous system to energy flow, that quality of self experience tended to dominate experience and form or influence one's self-identity. As an example, people whose dominant nervous system energy access and charge is in the nerves of the muscular system will tend to experience themselves as "beings of action, not feelings." Similarly, people whose dominant energy charge and flow is in the brain will experience themselves, and tend to formulate their identity around, as "cerebral."
- A good portion of client's ability to change was more dependent on their nervous system than on such things as desire, motivation, or the therapist's psychological adroitness: no matter how much the client might desire to experience a particular emotional quality or feeling state in their life, such as love, comfort or personal substance, if their nervous system relating to the bodily parts of us required for *registering* that quality or feeling state is energetically diminished or inaccessible, they could gain little access to that experience!
- Our sense of identity is not just a mental construct, but is informed by the qualities of body awareness through our nervous system.

A lot of things which people come to psychotherapy for, enhanced sense of self, connection to certain emotions, learning to handle emotions which overwhelm them, acquiring a sense of personal boundaries, etc., are underpinned, as body psychotherapy has asserted and demonstrated, by somatic functions and capacities. Addressing somatic functions through purely verbal means would seem to be the long way around—something like attempting to loose weight by watching television programs about diets! We could now say as well, adding the *NSEW* perspective, that even in a somatic approach, such as one using movement, deep tissue or other muscular work, without adequate flow of energy through nervous system related the areas of the body in which these therapeutic concerns are anchored, they cannot be fully addressed or changes won't be held.

Integrating *NSEW* into body psychotherapy work gives more access to the embodied experiences one is working with, and helps the client keep more of the awareness and learning they acquire. It also significantly speeds the process, as

we are no longer trying to “drive a nail with a screwdriver” ie trying to use a tool based in one system, say the muscular system, to create experience which might be better served through nervous system energy. This would, of course, be true for verbal therapy as well: trying to heal dilemmas of early developmental deprivation might be hastened by work on the parts of the nervous system on which that experience is dependent (Kepner 2005), rather than only through verbal means.

The nervous system as conveyance for the energy of awareness in the body.

It is an undeniable fact that most people experience the dominant locus of their awareness as in their head. From a nervous system energy perspective, this is because the brain is such a high density of nervous tissue, which we understand as the tissue which best carries subtle energy through the body, and thus is of a higher concentration of energy. It is also because of embryological developmental of the nervous system, which occurs from the head down, cephalo-caudal, making the brain the positive energetic pole to the notochord endpoints. Here we come to one of the prime observations of NSEW:

That awareness (consciousness) is “carried on” (but not the same as) nervous system energy. So the locus of such energy in the head tends to make the brain the seat or origin point of our awareness/consciousness.

If we understand this, then we can understand that the nervous system’s availability to energy flow from the brain on out to the peripheral nerves is what makes for embodied awareness. We can say that:

Nervous system, as conduit of energy, is the natural conduit for our awareness or consciousness into embodiment.

Now, it’s important here to make a distinction between having body *sensation* because of the basic physiological functions of our sensory nerves and receptors, and the quality of *embodied awareness*. In an otherwise intact nervous system, the basic functioning of our sensory nerves gives us awareness *of* our body sensation. By emphasizing the “*of*” I am referring to a common sense of signal “from a distance,” ie “I am up in the control tower of my head aware of sensations in my body down there.”

This is not the same as embodied awareness. Embodied awareness has the quality of awareness *in* the body, ie a sense of being directly present in the sensation or that part, or whole, of one’s body, from the inside out, so to speak. One can have adequate sensation of one’s body yet not feel “in and of” one’s body. Why is this distinction important?

It addresses why therapy clients often describe their experience, especially certain emotions such as anxiety, sadness, anger, etc, as happening *to* them, or “coming from below and taking me by surprise.” If I am not *in* my body, where

emotional sensations originate, then don't notice the sensations until they reach my head, ie surprise the "me" or self-awareness there. Also, because I don't live *in* my body, I don't identify with these feelings: so they feel like they are happening to me, instead of my emotions occurring.

Nervous system energy and enhancement of body sensation

While it's accurate to say that as I did above that, for the most part, the basic physiological functioning of our sensory nerves gives us adequate body sensation, this is true only up to a point. It is our observation that the quality and quantity of our body sensation is significantly enhanced when our nervous system is open to energy flow and has a sufficient amount of energy flowing through it, and diminished when this is not the case. So we can state this as a working principle of *NSEW* this way:

The quality and quantity of our body sensation is significantly affected by our nervous system's availability to the flow of energy through it, and amount of that energy flowing through it.

So, in addition to the embodiment of awareness/consciousness, flow of energy through the nervous system also affects the quality and quantity of body sensation we have available in that part of our body. These, in turn, have a significant affect on our experience of self and of our contact with others.

Major Routes Energy and Experience In Our Nervous System (separate chapter?)

Our connection to our bodily being: the Central Nervous System-

Our naturalistic experience is that our consciousness, the locus of our awake-awareness, originates in our head. In *NSEW* we take this as a given, that the first locus of awareness in terms of the nervous system is our brain. Awareness, as I have noted elsewhere, appears to be in part energetic in nature, or at least appears to be capable of being carried on subtle energy. Our consciousness registers the literal, physiological signal of our nervous system, but is not entirely dependent on it.

In terms of our experience of embodiment, the biggest pipeline for the subtle energy which becomes the carrier wave for the energy of our awareness to flow into, or connect with, our bodily being is the pathway of the central nervous system: the brain and spinal cord. The openness, continuity and strength of flow of energy through the central nervous system (especially in the feeding flow direction ie cephalo-caudal), determines our basic capacity to be more connected to our bodily life as well as our basic subjective sense of embodiment.

Thus, our most basic technique in *NSEW* consists of opening and clearing the energy pathway through the central nervous system, which we call *CNS*

*Chelation.*³ When this very fundamental pathway is clogged or discontinuous energetically, we find that a person's body awareness is rather limited to rather gross impressions, and that their sense of embodiment is limited to body-as-object.

One of the first assessments I make when doing hands-on work with clients is how open and connected they are to their body, by sensing the relative connection, density or flow of energy through the CNS. I may already have some notions about this from clinical observations and reports: clients who report they are "in their head" most of the time, or who have difficulty knowing what they feel inside or can't locate feeling sensation in a bodily location, or who are commonly dissociated and so on. So, this may be one of the first things to work on in a body oriented therapy: clearing the pathway through the CNS and coaching the client to use the increased capacity for connection to notice changes in their body sensation, to use breathing to promote flow of energy-awareness downward in their body through the now more open channels, to feel the contrast between areas of their spinal cord which are more open and areas which are not (using the sensation generated by my directed energy flow through the spinal cord).

I am mindful of a number of things when choosing this process to promote body awareness. One is that increasing connection to one's body through the CNS is *usually* less emotional than working with nervous system connections from the visceral body core where our affective experience is located. So, often this process is particularly useful as a relatively safe way to promote greater body awareness and sense of connection to oneself with people who carry a lot of traumatic emotionally charged feeling. By connecting to their body down through their back, they have more sensation of self, but of being more self-supported. Phrases like "backing oneself up" and "feeling one's own backbone" are not accidental: they come from the subjective psychology of body awareness associated with the sensation and function of that part of us.

Of course, there are caveats to this. Some people have been particularly traumatized from the back: back injuries, car accidents, surgeries, the particular circumstances of sexual abuse, beatings and so on. In these cases, generating *more* sensation in the back of the body, and bringing awareness more *into* this area, can bring the client more into connection with difficult, emotional or overwhelming sensations. The therapist has to be sensitive to this eventuality and work with the client to process and tolerate the emergence of this kind of awareness should it occur.

Is such increased awareness always a good thing? Sometimes, sensing the presence of trauma patterns or highly charged areas of storage in the body, I may choose to work directly with these areas before using techniques which directly increase awareness and connection. In my belief, it does little good

³ Chelation means "to clear," from the Latin, "claw out."

simply to replay bad experience for it's own sake (Kepner, Healing Tasks). If our interest is promoting the capacity to live fully in ones embodied being because this gives us the resources to engage in life more fully and satisfactorily, then we must be able to make the process of reconnecting more manageable than it was when the person disengaged with bodily life... *for good reason!* So there might be good reason to clear or open nervous system pathways in local areas, allowing the client to have a little more “distance” or buffer between these more charged areas and their awareness.

I also keep in mind that the two directions of flow through the nervous system, feeding flow (of energy from the main nerve pathways to the peripheral nerve endings) and return flow (of energy from the nerve endings back into the main nerves) can bring about different subjective experience. The CNS clearing process, based on feeding flow, tends to bring awareness more *into* the body. Thus we subjectively feel more present in our body, and more located at the source of difficulty should this pathway bring us to a body area associated with difficulty. In this sense, it has more the sensation of “coming to our feelings.”

Working from a return flow direction, eg opening flow from a body area which carries or stores emotional charge and opening the nerve pathways back to the central nervous system, has more the experience of “feelings coming up.” Depending on how alienated we are from the nature of the feelings coming up this can feel like a relief and release of feelings, especially when the therapist can support positive and contactful expression of these feelings, or it can feel like being flooded with something overwhelming and “out of nowhere.”

Our “exterior:” Peripheral sensory/muscular nerves

The readiness and availability (openness) of our musculo-skeletal nervous system, the nerves which carry feeding and return flow to our muscles, joints, and superficial sensory organs, has a great influence on our experienced sense-of-self and on our focus of contact in the world. Our musculo-skeletal system is usually the part of us we have the most sensory and energetic contact with. This means that we feel ourselves most in our activity, and in our outward, in the world oriented contact. This also means that my sense of self is located in my surface and in my boundary with the world, and in my activities.

Dilemmas of the exterior

For clients who have little sense of their personal boundaries, I find that they also have limited sensation in the musculo-skeletal system and either limited feeding flow from this system, return flow, or both. Similar with those who have little sense of their efficacy, power or strength: they invariably have little contact of energy flow (especially feeding flow) to their muscles.

Others push all their energy into muscles and have little available to feel their insides, their interior nervous system where emotions are felt. They are doers but not feelers. Some use their musculature to deal with interior sensation and

feeling by taking that energy in the interior, and pushing outward into the muscular nervous system to store it there. This is highly effective, because muscles can't feel emotions! They are great storage devices for energy (both biological and mechanical, and subtle energy), and so when emotional energy is pushed from the interior outward and then held there (by shutting down return flow), the muscles become dense, thickened, tight and clogged. The other strategy is to push this energy out into the muscles and discharge it in movement. It has the same effect of preventing emotional energy from being felt in the body interior, where it can be felt as emotion, but results in more movement and lively activity. People who tend to create dramas quickly, or who act impulsively often have an overly available nerve pathway where they can readily shift of internal emotional energy into muscular action.

Our “insides:” visceral nerves of SNS & PNS

The sense of our being in the outer world which comes from the basic spinal cord, sensory and muscular nerves could be described as our experience of our body self as *agent* and *container*. But as embodied beings we are both container and *contents*.⁴ *Our experience of having contents or insides comes from our autonomic nervous system, the parasympathetic and sympathetic nerves which enervate our internal organs.*

Most of us have been taught in biology and physiology that this part of our nervous system, in both sensory and motor forms is completely unawares and not accessible to conscious awareness or control. Nerve signal from our internal organs is certainly registered by our brain, and we all commonly experience broad internal organ sensations such as fullness, hunger, arousal, fear (via increased heart-rate, respiration, and so on), etc.

As the autonomic nervous system is made more accessible to energy, our sense of “having insides” becomes even more clear and pronounced. Not surprisingly, we also gain greater access to our inner life, our inner emotions, our gut feelings, and to a textured sense of our experience which comes from being able to register this dimension of our embodied being. Psychotherapy patients who present symptoms such as “I am empty inside,” frequently turn out to be energetically blocked to significant parts of their autonomic nervous system and so they register only a “blankness” in their bodily field of awareness which they then secondarily interpret as “emptiness.” On more careful exploration of their sensorium this “emptiness” turns out to be lack of sensation, like a mouth area numbed by anesthetic. They may not be “empty”

in the psychological sense of the term, but rather are simply unable to *feel* their insides. *In our view here this is because they don't have access to their autonomic nervous system via energetic connection and availability.* One could work therapeutically on the relational and symbolic meanings of this inner

⁴ A phrase used by Bonnie Bainbridge-Cohen (1993).

“emptiness” and do little to make accessible the autonomic nerves and organ experience which is closed to energy and consciousness.

This is not to say that such nervous system process doesn't have relational, emotional and defensive roots. We become cut off from our inner nervous system in the context of emotionally empty early attachments, to defend against overwhelming affect in ourselves and others, to cope with difficult experience, and so on. As the autonomic nervous system is opened to energy and awareness, these things will often come to awareness and be available to therapeutic work.

An open energetic flow from our CNS into the autonomic nervous system nerves creates a clearer sense of *having insides*: registering our inner sensation and process. As our EOA spreads into the nerves of our autonomic nervous system, we shift from the experience of *having insides* to *being inside*, and begin to feel that we are *living from the inside out*. We have a sense of our core, our depths, in a way that is not just metaphorical as these terms are often used in psychotherapy, but real in a physical sense. Our “depths” are literally our nerves and organs deep in our body core. “Deep inside me” is the feeling of sensation and consciousness embedded in one's autonomic nervous system. “My core” is the feeling of being anchored in the literal location of the central axis of the torso through the sympathetic nervous system.

The most direct neural routes for the consciousness from the brain into the body core (torso) and the visceral organs is through the nerves of the autonomic nervous system especially the sympathetic ganglion chain and the vagus nerve. The sympathetic chain, which descends on either side of the spine inside the body cavity, and the vagus nerve which descends from the brain stem and branches into the heart, lungs, and mid abdominal digestive organs, both in centers of the brain stem. The vagus nerve is a cranial nerve, meaning it emerges directly from the brain and does not go through any spinal cord mediation as do the sympathetic tracts. It is from the quality of energy and awareness through these nerves, as well as the less conscious sensory nerve signal, that we have a sense of our insides, our inner gut/visceral sense of experience.

Sensory nerve signal alone may give us some vague form of inner visceral sensation, but it is not sufficient to give us a sense of being inside ourselves, rooted in our inner presence and substance. Only when the consciousness is connected to and spread down into our visceral organs via the autonomic nervous system does this sense of inner presence and substance become tangible and specific. When the consciousness is *not* able to connect with and spread into our autonomic visceral nerves we may feel autonomic stimulation and emotions, but it is experienced as coming from “down there” rather than “inside *me*.” We may experience our feelings and emotions as “rising from below” without a clear connection to our own ongoing process. For example, in panic and anxiety disorder the person often feels himself or herself as “taken over” by a

wave of anxiety rising up from the solar plexus or chest which occurs “from nowhere,” i.e. from someplace one has no awareness of at a until it is stimulated above a certain sensation threshold, but has not connection of self when it is above threshold.

As we open the nerve pathways to energetic flow and thus create access for conscious awareness, clients can experience a sense of their insides, and find more connection to their emotions and inner life. Anxiety clients can feel these emotions at a lower level of stimulus and be helped to own and integrate these emotions into their egoic self.

The autonomic nervous system has two major components, the sympathetic nervous system and the parasympathetic nervous system. Each of these, and their sub-components, give rise to phenomenologically different qualities, particularly as they relate to our sense of an embodied self. I will present a broad overview of some of our current findings below.

Parasympathetic nervous system experience-

Vagal experience:

The vagus nerve, really a nerve system in some ways, is one of the longest nerves in the body with direct cranial connection. It originates in the midbrain and descends down the torso interior all the way to the umbilical area, with organ branches to the eyelids, middle ear, salivary glands, heart, bronchial tubes, stomach, liver, pancreas, and parts of the large and small intestine. It reaches a tremendous amount of our body interior.

The experience of being energetically present and connected into the vagus nerve is that of having inner presence and substance. We feel a sense of being filled into ourselves, of having inner substance. It seems experientially to be a softer edged quality of our insides than our sense of connection into our sympathetic nerves (see below). Much of our vagal experience of self is related to the sensations and process of feeding and ingesting food: an open and receptive quality of experience in the eyes and mouth, a sense of moving down and into ones soft body core, a suffusing warmth in the chest that comes with slowing cardiac activity and bronchial dilation, the sensations of interior satisfaction and fullness which comes from the esophageal and intestinal presence.

Our vagal experience, as Porges has pointed out, is also tremendously relational in nature. It is about the fundamental relational experiences of nourishment, need satisfaction, contact in a safe field, middle-mode capacity for engagement with another (where dialogue, self-soothing and real listening is possible) and so on. So lack of development or connection to our vagal self-experience makes relational contact more difficult, less satisfying, and lacking in sense of depth.

A lot of what in psychotherapy is referred to as “oral” is more properly *vagal* in nature, and has to do with those things which are patterned after the feeding process, but are felt and experienced in much more of us than the mouth. The whole segmented approach of Reich to the psychology of the body tends to break down when you look at whole nervous system pathways.

Contact with yearning, longing, heart-felt wounds, difficulty with self-comforting and self soothing, difficulty with love, relatedness, lack of internal sense of sufficiency, and so on, are often related to energetic blockage and lack of presence in parts of the vagus system. I have written a paper on the vagus nerve and emotional process (Kepner 2004) which gives more detailed description.

Lower parasympathetic experience:

The lower parasympathetic nerves, which emerge from the sacrum, enervate the lower digestive and pelvic organs. Our internal experience through these nerves is not as specific as that arising from the vagus nerve whose major organs, the heart, lungs, upper digestive and transverse colon, seem to give us more definite and distinctive qualities of experience. We might best describe registry of our lower parasympathetic nervous system as experiencing presence of, and in, our “earthy” self because of the connection to sexuality and digestion. Another quality is a sense of our “depths.” The sense of having a deep inner well of feeling comes from being connected to and living from (the EOA spread into) our lower parasympathetic nervous system.

Sympathetic nervous system experience

Physiologically, the sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system is responsible for arousal states, to prepare the us for high output activity, the so-called “fight or flight” reaction: increased heart rate, blood pressure and respiration, decrease in peristalsis and digestive activity (to free metabolic energy for the brain and muscles), an increase in cortisol and other adrenal secretions.⁵ Phenomenologically, this creates a general sense of internal charge and excitement, of being energized and of readiness or active engagement.

Our energetic experience of being in our sympathetic nervous system is in part related to this physiological sense of arousal, but also related to the anatomical structure and location of one of its primary components: the sympathetic ganglion chain. The sympathetic ganglion chain descends all the way from the upper cervical vertebrae bilaterally on either side of the spine, but anterior to it, just inside the body cavity from the spine, all the way to the sacrum. Thus it defines a kind of internal axis just in front of the spine, interior to the body. Nerve roots at each vertebral level reflex from the spinal cord to the ganglion.

⁵ Overall, increase in sympathetic nervous system activity tends to decrease parasympathetic activity, although in some areas these both are required, as in sexual arousal where heart rate increase and yet peripheral vasodilatation (for erection and genital swelling) co-occur.

Recall that our main route of consciousness or inhabitation into our embodiment is first from our brain downwards into our spinal cord (CNS). When we energetically inhabit our spinal cord and thence our into our sympathetic ganglion chain we have a very clear sense of being centered in ourselves in kind of an inner column and of being aligned with and supported by our axis. This sense of our axis is tremendously stabilizing to ones personality, and we feel much more able to hold our personal ground unswayed when we have it. A lot of issues which psychotherapists have framed in our era as about “boundaries” are not about how we manage interaction at our edges at all, but rather are how we feel displaced from this axis-center in our body and have no center. If we are not adequately anchored in our sympathetic/spinal axis through these parts of our nervous system, we easily “loose ourselves” and center upon the experience or agenda of others.

As energy can spread into the sympathetic nerves that reflex from the ganglion chain into specific organs we add to this axis a sense of organ tone, and internal support. The quality of “charge” that is characteristic of sympathetic nervous system energy carries a felt quality of being “pumped up.” We feel filled out inside, not just with a sense of internal presence (as occurs from our connection to the parasympathetic nerves into the organs) but of being somewhat expanded, internally defined and toned.

Our supports and grounding: Leg nerves

Grounding is a major focus in any body oriented therapy. Body therapies note the interdependence of such crucial psychological themes of self-support, reality contact, security of self, and connection to the real world; with our sensory contact with and presence in our legs. Such common phrases as “feet on the ground,” “not having a leg to stand on,” “taking a stand,” “finding one’s footing,” “off balance”, “had his legs cut out from under him,” and so on, are not mere metaphors to a body therapist, but allusions to the intimately physical ways in which our relationship to our legs contributes to our psychological reality.

Many body therapists work religiously on exercises, movements, and physical manipulation to promote sensation, physical strength, energy flow and connection to ones legs to enhance these psychological issues. As with other things in body therapy, I found it frustrating that this essential experience of grounding was often so difficult to maintain for clients who were otherwise “not in their legs.” I had a personal stake in this since, given my own body structure, grounding is an on-going issue for me. Even after years of work, I had to work regularly to maintain the degree of grounding in my legs I had been able to develop.

Working with the nervous system energy, it became readily apparent that difficulties in grounding are directly related to lack of flow through the sciatic and

femoral nerves of the legs. Viewed from this perspective, it actually is quite amazing that so many people can have such difficulties connecting to their legs, since the sciatic nerves are the biggest (diameter) nerves in the body! This means that they should be the biggest pipes for energy and awareness in the body. Why is it that they can be so disconnected or lacking in flow? The femoral nerves, also, are relatively substantial in diameter and should be able to carry energy and awareness readily.

A couple things effect our energetic connection to our legs especially. One is that with so much focus in the head and having lives which are both stressful (ie energetically depleted) and with little physical movement during the day, many people have literally “pulled up” what energy they have into their upper body. There is a kind of traction or upward pull that reserves energy for thinking and facial engagement, not movement and grounding. Another thing is that the femoral nerves emerge from between the lumbar vertebrae, and so back tension and compression tends also to cut off energy flow into these nerves and thus into the front (anterior) part of the legs. A third factor is that the sciatic nerve emerges from nerve roots and plexuses in the interior of the pelvis at the sacrum, joining together into the sacral nerve. Any trauma in the pelvis, surgeries, sexual abuse and so on, will constrict flow in the pelvis and cut off connection to these leg nerves.

Direct energetic work to open the flow through the femoral and sciatic nerves and foster this flow all the way down the legs (feeding flow) and back to the spinal cord (return flow) has been one of the most effective ways I have found to generate clear and lasting experience of grounding. This energetic work can then be taken advantage of and maintained in grounding exercises and practices, as well as carried in the upright standing position where “feeling your feet on the ground,” “having both legs to stand on,” “feel how it is to literally take a stand in relation to me,” or have the possibility to “find your footing as you think about that personal issue,” can be actually experimented with.

Of course, sensitive work at the location of the nerve roots for these nerves also connects to important issues associated with those body areas. Opening the lumbar nerve roots for the femoral nerves may also open connection to the emotions compressed into the nerve matrix in this area as we “put behind us” feelings and memories we don’t want to see. Opening the connection to the sacral plexuses may also require working through traumatic experience, disconnection from first-chakra life force issues (not coming fully into existence for example), or sexual issues.

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Appendices

Phenomenological aspects of the energetic nervous system

Muscular self-

Movement in the world

Activity and external focus

Sense of self as doing-self: I feel myself in my activity.

Cerebral self

I feel/sense my self located in my head.

Rest of body is “signal from a distance” or absent (virtual body).

I feel/sense my self in my thinking.

Visceral self

The Body Core

I feel/sense my self in my visceral feelings and sensations:

SNS based experience self- I feel/sense my self in arousal, charged emotions, feelings that result in action.

PNS based experience self- I feel/sense my self in quietude, as sluggish, etc.

Spiritual Self

Nervous system carrying frequencies which allow access to our experience of the “higher bodies.”

Emotional experience and nervous system energy

Contact with one’s “insides” – the autonomic nerves

Coming to our feelings & feelings coming up

Free energy vs stored.

Nerves and nerve matrix

Emotional energy pushed out into muscles.

Emotion stored in the nerve matrix ie unavailable to free processing by emotional sensors of visceral nervous system and CNS.

Appendix: Fundamental NSEW principles and concepts

Since the ideas of this paper are based on the fundamental principles of NSEW, they are reviewed here for the reader less familiar with them, as a support to the main thrust of the paper.

The circulation of energy through the nervous system

There are basically two directions of energy flow through the *energetic nervous system*, *feeding flow* and *return flow*.

Feeding Flow

The tissues and organs of the body are fed by subtle energy flowing from the central nervous system (CNS- brain and spinal cord), then through the peripheral nerves, through nerve branches and into smaller nerves, and finally out of the nerve endings in tissues all over the body and in every organ.

Return flow

Used energy flows, what an acupuncturist might call "stale chi," back through the nerve endings, through the small nerves back to larger nerves and eventually back to the CNS or other nerve tissues which are responsible for clearing this used energy from the body.

How the energetic nervous system differs from the physiological nervous system

Although the flow of energy through the nerves does effect and enhance nervous system function and sensation, two things are strikingly different about energy flow through nerves compared to the electro-chemical flow of physiological nerve transmission. One is that, energetically speaking, *feeding and return flow occur in the same nerve*. It appears that energy flow through nerve tissue is more based on the tissue being nerve tissue, than what kind of nerve it is. This is perhaps like a coaxial cable that has one cable with current flowing in both directions. When trained healers can sense the energy in a nerve that has adequate feeding and return flow, they describe it feeling as if "fish are swimming through a tube in both directions."

Therefore, feeding and return flow both occur in every nerve in the body, regardless of whether it is an afferent or efferent nerve, a pain fiber or a sensory fiber, autonomic or skeletal nerve. In other words, *the whole nervous system is an energetic system*. However, trained practitioners can readily distinguish the distinguishing qualities of different kinds of nerve tissues, as well as their state, as they have a different energetic "feel" from other types of nerves.

The Nerve matrix

Energy doesn't just transfer from nerve endings directly to organ tissues and back again. There is an intermediary state or process that seems to be both physical and energetic in nature, which we call the *nerve matrix*. The nerve matrix appears as a mesh-like, energetic web that interpenetrates the tissues, and carries the energy from the nerve endings into the tissues it is embedded in. Feeding flow comes off of the nerve endings and into the nerve matrix where the tissues absorb it, at least in health, and return flow is absorbed back into the nerve endings from the nerve matrix in that tissue.

The nerve matrix acts as a kind of “wetlands” which absorbs and holds subtle energy so it doesn’t just spill through the body like water through a sluice, and also can temporarily store excess energy which can’t be readily distributed. When there is inadequate return flow, the nerve matrix related to those nerves can become stagnant and full of excess or “stale” energy.

This notion of a nerve-matrix interpenetrating the tissues of the organs and muscles and so on will become important when we look later at where emotional and sensory energies, and other impressions associated with psychological experience, get stored and held in the body.

Abdominal nerve matrix- the reservoir for energy

Everywhere there is nerve there is nerve matrix. The more nerve there is, the more nerve matrix there is. The abdominal and pelvic organs, especially the intestines, are rife with nerves, and are therefore deeply saturated with nerve matrix. This abdominal nerve matrix is a crucial reservoir for energy, which feeds the whole nervous system. It is the main supply source for the CNS in its role of directing energy and feeding flow. Bill Gray referred to this as "the magnetic field" since it is not only a reservoir of energy but also important in supporting the magnetic and dynamic properties of nervous system energy. We find this term confusing to modern students who have usually been taught that the aura as a whole is a "magnetic field" and so we call this the *abdominal nerve matrix* to avoid this confusion.

Matching energy

The qualities of nervous system energy that each person requires for their health and well being are various, but the most fundamental is the frequency that most closely *matches* the natural signature energy of their nervous system. This *matching energy* resonates throughout the nervous system and the body core, and we sometimes call it the *base frequency* of the person.

Learning to sense and run matching energy for each individual client is one of the first skills learned in NSEW. When one is well matched in energy, there is no sense of intrusiveness or disturbance in the client from having energy that feels alien to them. The nervous system seems built to reject energy that is foreign to it, and will push the healer out when they are not well matched.

Having one's nervous system filled with one's own matching energy is a tremendously comforting and stabilizing process, which has uses in working with anxiety and depressive states. It is often described as being “filled with your self,” and so has also implications for finding one's sense of body identity.

Nerve tension

Energy depletion, psychological disorder, injury, disease, trauma and other conditions can create problems in flow in the energetic nervous system, either because there is not enough energy overall, or some organs are using up more leaving less for the rest of the system. Organs in need seem to pull or have stronger draw for energy. This pull creates a quality of tautness in the nerves related to that organ. In turn, this pull can create an energy lack in another body area or organ, which then creates a nerve tension of its own. Eventually you can have nerve tensions in areas far from the original site of dilemma, as well as a network or tangle of nerve tensions.

Although we know that, physiologically, nerves don't tense and contract like muscles do, the energetic tension has a similar physical and subjective effect, leaving us wrought up and tautened from the inside.

You can also have networks of nerve tension associated with illness, trauma, or even emotional states. Part of the healer's art in NSEW is sensing and releasing these nerve tensions so the body can be restored to its feeding and return flow. It is remarkable to watch the client's body shift and ease as these nerve tensions are released.

Subtle Energy Methods

Many traditional systems of healing refer to an energy that flows through the body and creates a subtle field around and through the body. It is sometimes referred to as the *auric field* or *human energy field*. Although it cannot be measured easily (see Oschman) through scientific instrumentation one can learn to sense its presence or absence, discern its qualities, and also to utilize its effects on health and consciousness. In many subtle energy systems, the practitioner or "healer" is trained to generate a flow of subtle energy and to intentionally direct this flow of energy, usually through touch, to affect subtle energy flow and functioning of the client's energy system. This is true of NSEW as well.

Most hands-on subtle energy healing systems have some practice for either:

- a) Building up a charge of energy that it can be discharged into the patient to correct imbalances. This is characteristic of many of the chi kung healing methods or, (refs)
- b) Using principles and touch work to balance and redirect the client's existing internal energy. Polarity Therapy and acupressure are examples of this, or (refs)
- c) Develop practices that allow the practitioner to to channel through their own body or energy field a flow of energy from an outside source. Brennan and Bruyere's (refs)

Nervous System Energy Work partakes of both b and c in it's approach, generating energy to the client's energy system and balancing the dynamic forces in the client's field as well. A guided meditation which is the basis for developing one's access to an energetic source, called the "Koosh ball" technique, can be found at:
<http://www.pathwaysforhealing.com/Koosh%20Meditation.mp3>

Flow and Field

Subtle energy work is often referred to through two views or metaphors, *flow* and *field*.

Energy As Flow

Most subtle energy healing systems refer to energy as *flowing* along certain pathways in the body. When energy systems speak of energy being blocked, limited, in excess and so on, they are usually referring to the flowing or watery aspect of subtle energy.

Energy As Field

Energy is also referred to as a *field* which surrounds and interpenetrates the physical body, often called the *auric field* or *energy body*. This field has many different layers, energy bodies of different frequencies and subtlety, embedded within each other. Centers of energy are often referred to, called as *chakras*. Each chakra is associated with a different energy body layer, and each energy body with a different realm or quality of experience and consciousness.

ⁱ The United States Association of Body Psychotherapy summarizes the comment elements of body psychotherapy this way:

“Body psychotherapy recognizes the continuity and the deep connections that all psychocorporal processes contribute, in equal fashion, to the organization of the whole person. there is no hierarchical relationship between mind and body, between psyche and soma. they are both functioning and interactive aspects of the whole.” from “*Definition of body psychotherapy*” www.usabp.org

“Body psychotherapy helps people deal with their concerns not only through talking, but also by helping people become deeply aware of their bodily sensations as well as their emotions, images and behavior. Clients become more conscious of how they breathe, move, speak, and where they experience feelings in their bodies. People seek body psychotherapy for the same reasons they seek talking or any form of psychotherapy (e.g., anxiety, depression, relationship problems, sexual difficulties), but also for physical problems (e.g., headaches, lower back pain).

All experiences, as well as distortions and denials of reality and other defensive maneuvers, are reflected not only in peoples' thoughts and feelings but also in the way they move, how they breathe and how the structure of their bodies has evolved over the years. To say that a person has his or her "feet on the ground," "leads with the chin," "has a stiff upper lip," or "their head in the clouds," are not mere figures of speech, but literal observations of the way our bodies express

ourselves. How a person says something may be as important as what he or she says. Underlying this approach is the assumption that we are embodied beings and that there is a unity between the psychological and bodily aspects of being." From "*A Brief Description of Body Psychotherapy*" www.usabp.org