

PBSP® PERSPECTIVE ON WILHELM REICH

by

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I am pleased to speak at this commemoration of the 100th birthday of Dr. Wilhelm Reich. Dr. Reich's influence in focusing attention on the place and use of body experience and expression in the field of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy is immense. Therefore it is most fitting and appropriate that this august body should be meeting here in Sao Paolo. He deserves honor for a lifetime of devotion to seeking the truths to be found in the core of human nature, whatever its consequences.

I am neither a Reichian, nor have I ever been trained as a Reichian, but I totally share Reich's belief that we can only become psychologically and emotionally healed when we trust and live in conscious participation with our true nature.

But how do we determine what is our true nature? What are our criteria and what are our guidelines? Reich strove to find, and believed he had found, a single fundamental force that was evident at every level of organization – micro to macro. He felt that he had solved the puzzle about our true nature in orgone energy, the pulsating, contracting actions that he saw everywhere, on every level from non-living material to living flesh. I think he believed he had discovered in the orgone, the biological equivalent of Einstein's famous equation, $E=mc^2$ – energy equals mass multiplied by the speed of light squared. Thus, he saw orgone energy as the base of immense power that should be handled with great care less it produce massive destruction, just as the atom bomb produced massive destruction.

Everyone who is dedicated to serving humanity could use Dr. Reich as a model for one dares to look, without blinking, at the nuclear center of human biological, psychological and spiritual existence. But they should be forewarned, as students of the Kabbala are forewarned when they make a study of the Kabbala – the ancient Jewish system of thought regarding the mysterious nature of the universe – that they must be of clear, strong and balanced mind or they could go mad.

I have spent most of my lifetime dedicated first, to understanding my own being and healing the misery I found in myself, and then to applying what I learned to help others live with less misery and in greater harmony and pleasure within themselves, along with those close to them. My personal misery led me to explore the depths of my own existence and look deeply into the question of whether there was meaning and organization in life. I was desperate to find that there was indeed something to trust and follow within my self and within the very fabric of living flesh. I held, as a talisman in that search, the fleetingly remembered, but seemingly lost forever, states of happiness, pleasure and joy I had sometimes felt as an innocent child. Also, I was most fortunate in having the available hand of my similarly searching wife, Diane Boyden Pesso, to hold on to.

But before I found a way out of the darkness of psychic alienation, most of my living during that time of painful search was spent on that precarious cusp between, sanity and madness, life and death. Fortunately, till now, I have not gone mad – or those near me are too caring and polite to tell me that I have – and clearly I still live, albeit sometimes precariously. And, To my credit and relief, there is enough evidence in myself and others, that my efforts to achieve a pathway to good living has led to a marked improvement in the capacity to enjoy the pleasures of existence in a meaningful world. My and my wife's lives till now and for the rest of our remaining years continue to be dedicated to helping others achieve what we believe and know are available to all who have received the gift of life.

I came to the field of psychotherapy from an unconventional background. From my youth I had been taken with the idea of achieving physical well being in combination with a well trained mind – very much in line with the classic Greek viewpoint. I loved to move my body and as an adolescent turned to physical activities that satisfied that desire. At the same time, I attended Stuyvesant High School, the most prestigious school in New York City devoted to science and mathematics. Upon graduation, I did not take the expected step into the university for further study of science, but to my and my family's surprise, by chance, discovered modern dance and became a devotee and student of Martha Graham.

Those of you who know the work of Martha Graham must also know the foundation movements in her school of dance are considered highly sexual – consisting of convulsive pulsations doing what she called contractions and releases. It had not come to my mind until the moment of writing this paper that her contractions and releases are precisely in line with Reich's description of orgone energy. It occurs to me now that though it was known she was highly influenced by Freud, that she must also have read and been influenced by Reich. Perhaps I have been trained as a Reichian while studying with Martha Graham without knowing it!

Our odyssey from dance to psychotherapy came during the period when Diane and I were teaching dance in the Theater Education Department of Emerson College where I was a tenured associate professor and director of the Dance Department. To shorten a very long and interesting story, we founded in 1961 -- 36 years ago -- a new psychotherapy process we then called Psychomotor therapy -- which is now taught and applied in the US and Europe as Pesso Boyden System Psychomotor, PBSP® for short.

Whenever I read and re-read Reich's thought and theories (as I did in preparation for this conference) I am ever again impressed and moved by his dedication to the amelioration of human misery, which he saw as a consequence of the denial of true human nature.

Here I quote Dr. Reich "The character structure of man of today – who is perpetuating a patriarchal, authoritarian culture some four to six thousand years old—is characterized by an armoring against nature within himself and against social misery outside himself."

I could not agree more. As a dancer, I too was looking deeply into human nature to determine what was the "natural" way to move. Among others, I was influenced by the thinking of Delsarte who strove to discover what spontaneous actions rose from basic human emotions in their "natural" state. To learn more about this, he would hasten to locations where catastrophic events, had recently taken place -- like coal mine disasters and other life threatening disruptions. There he would see how people moved and expressed themselves when they were impacted by situations so powerful that they ripped away social controls and inhibitions.

His work led me to understand that human movement and behavior had at least two sources. First: that part of our brain that produces spontaneous emotional behavior, and second: that part that produces controlled volitional behavior. We know from brain research that what Diane and I learned to call the emotional motor system arises from the primitive parts of our brain – the limbic system, the thalamus and amygdala. These brain systems are the source of interactive/interpersonal and survival behavior. What my Diane and I learned to call the voluntary motor system arises from more evolutionary recent parts of the brain – the massive cerebral cortex including the voluntary motor cortex which contributes to controlled movement and/or the inhibition of behavior.

Thus, the human brain's two motor system design lays the groundwork for potential conflict – with one motor system pitted against the other -- during child abuse or when life denying social/cultural forces lead us to inhibit natural, emotional/instinctual expression in the name of family safety or cultural/social harmony.

This is not to say that voluntary motor capacities and therefore cultural/social forces are in and of themselves life-denying, or that emotional instinctual behaviors are in and of themselves life-serving.

Also, there are other elements at play. The right hemisphere is mostly involved in emotional expression and pattern recognition and allows a rapid and holistic way to apprehend and respond to external conditions. The left hemisphere is mostly involved in verbal and symbolic representation of reality and has a slower and more linear way to respond to external conditions. Roughly speaking, the right hemisphere is the emotional side and the left hemisphere the more cognitive side. Thus the war of the psyche could take place in two fronts, the higher brain functions against the lower and the left hemisphere functions against the right. Since evolution has provided us with both, we can and must learn to integrate, balance and harmonize both in the highest service of evolutionary possibilities.

I have no doubt that the totality of each individual's evolutionary, genetic equipment is rooted in service to life and directed toward the flowering and well being of the human species – and indeed, the well being of the entire planet. We live in a world with other living beings. Our task is to learn to combine, balance and coordinate all of our individual capacities toward two ends, our own individual maximum health and pleasure and in an appropriately respectful way, the maximum health and pleasure of all others.

Let us return to the question of what is our true nature.

Reich says, "The theory of sex-economy can be put in a few sentences. Psychic health depends upon orgastic potency, that is, on the capacity for surrender in the acme of sexual excitation in the natural sexual act. Its basis is the un-neurotic character attitude of capacity for love. Mental illness is a result of a disturbance in the natural capacity for love. In the case of orgastic impotence, from which a vast majority of humans are suffering, biological energy is damned up, thus becoming the source of all kinds of irrational behavior. The cure of psychic disturbances requires in the first place the establishment of the natural capacity for love. It depends as much upon social as upon psychic conditions."

I don't agree that psychic health depends upon orgastic potency, but I do believe that humans suffer from biological energy being damned up. On that point, Diane and I focused on something a bit different. Reich says that mental illness is a result of a disturbance in the natural capacity for love. Love

is an interactive process. To be able to love we must first be loved. Let me describe how we came across the need for interactions and what came after that.

When Diane and I first began to teach our students to move according to how they felt we discovered an interesting phenomenon. The direct expression of emotion, without inhibition was enormously satisfying to do and to watch, but soon after the expression there was often a let down and that caught our attention. We intuited that there was another step that had to be included in providing satisfying emotional expression, that of interaction. To solve that problem, we arranged for one person at a time to express their emotions while others in the group could be asked to be role-players and "accommodate" the expressed behavior. Accommodation means to provide the satisfying, wished for interaction that would validate and complete the expressed emotion or need. If the emotion expressed is the shape, then the accommodation is the counter shape that completes the internal gestalt required by the expression of emotion.

A final step seemed needed to satisfactorily complete emotional expression and that was to give meaning to the total process. This resulted in the development of the following formula. Energy, the inner emotional need or state, leads to Action, the outer expression of that need or state, Interaction, the external satisfying response of others to that need or state, culminating in Meaning, the conscious, verbal understanding of the implication of the expression including the acceptance of it by significant figures in the outside world.

What started off seeming so simple began to become much more complicated. Clearly, there was not only an innate need to exercise the right hemisphere and primitive brain centers, but the left hemisphere had a thirst to understand and give meaning and names to what was so satisfactorily produced. Humans are meaning making animals.

To go back to early beginnings again for a moment, we noted that very often people seemed to want to express anger as a way to let our what was locked up inside. Even after that anger was "accommodated" to -- that is provided a satisfying response by the role-player falling as if injured by the blows or actions directed at them, there was often once again, discontent after the initial satisfaction. We surmised that the anger was not a need in and of itself, but the result of a frustration of a more fundamental need.

Then, once again, we thought we had it. People had the need for nurture in their childhood and when that was frustrated they got angry and were still waiting for that childhood need to be satisfied, though they were adults. Eureka, our childhood needs are hidden in our adult bodies and there are two consequences. One: endless anger to that frustration, and two: endlessly expressed, distorted attempts to achieve childhood needs in adult relationships.

To solve that dilemma, we invented what we called Ideal Parents, role-played figures who would satisfy bodily expressed childhood needs while clients were actively in touch with childhood memories and longings for satisfaction of those needs. The invention of Ideal Figures who would satisfactorily accommodate childhood needs established the base for what would become a very complex theory and process. You can well imagine that other needs beside nurture showed up. Ultimately we found five developmental needs that had to be attended to: place, nurture, support protection and, surprisingly, limits. Isn't that a strange one? A biological need for limits? But a most essential one. If we don't experience limits we suffer serious consequences regarding boundaries and finiteness of our being. But that is too much to go into now.

Let me jump ahead and tell you where PBSP® is at this stage of its evolution. While Reich believe that the central evolutionary longing of individuals is for orgasmic potency, we believe that the central motive force in life is the search for pleasure, satisfaction meaning and connectedness. No doubt orgasmic potency in its fullest sense includes pleasure satisfaction meaning and connectedness. Reich had no interest in sexuality potency that did not include love and his definition of love certainly included meaning and connectedness.

Can one strive directly to achieve pleasure, satisfaction, meaning and connectedness in their present life. Somehow, I think not. That state seems dependent on how one has been raised and whether basic genetic/biological needs have been appropriately attended to at the appropriate age. And what if they have not been attended to at the appropriate age and have no literal memories that would support and sustain those satisfactions? We try to solve that dilemma by making new virtual memories, out of symbolic, therapeutic events. That is, in the therapeutic process which we call a structure, people are invited to experience -- while they are in the appropriate emotional age state -- what it would have felt like to have role-played, Ideal Parents or the necessary other Ideal Figures who would have seen to it that each developmental stage would have been satisfyingly counter shaped and validated. Those virtual, positive, life-enhancing memories can be stored beside the old, negative, life denying memories that tend to endlessly haunt the present in their endless insistence to be replayed with different actors cast in the old familiar roles.

I wont go now into the technology of how this is done, for I want to take the remaining time to complete the list of what we think are the necessary genetically determined life tasks that must be attended to in order to achieve the blessed state of full biological pleasure and potency. These could be described as the Tao of the genes – the way to emotional nirvana, not in the next life or lives, but in this single, physical, biological, spiritual lifetime.

One: we must have our basic developmental needs of place, nurture, support, protection and limits satisfied at the right age by the right kinship figures

Two: we must be helped integrate and unify the polarities of our being – the polarity of sperm and egg, the polarity of left hemisphere and right hemisphere, the polarity of the motor system and the sensory system, the polarity of actions of putting out and taking in and the polarity of maleness and femaleness.

Three: we must be helped to develop our consciousness.

Four: we must be helped to develop our Pilot, the central responsible, choosing, executive, accountable, self initiating part of our selves.

And lastly, Five: we must be helped to fulfill our personal uniqueness and potentiality.

Were Reich still alive I feel sure he would endorse those goals and see them as consistent with his hope for humanity.

I end with a final quote from Reich. "This armoring of the character is the basis of loneliness, helplessness, craving for authority, fear of responsibility, mystical longing, sexual misery, of impotent rebelliousness as well as of resignation of an unnatural and pathological type. Human beings have taken a hostile attitude toward that in themselves which is living and have alienated themselves from it. This

alienation is not of biological, but of social and economic origin. It is not found in human history before the development of the patriarchal social order."

In that spirit I hope that we who carry on the trust and belief in natural, genetic, biological human, processes will be a positive influence in the world and bring to it much needed and much deserved well being, pleasure, satisfaction meaning and connectedness.

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