



SAFletter

Newsletter of the Sensory Awareness Foundation

Spring 2006

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All photos in this issue by Stefan Laeng-Gilliatt, except page 1 and the picture of Felicitas Voigt.



In A Heartbeat

Reclaiming Vitality and Presence

In Our Troubled World

Experiential Sensory Awareness Conference

Mount Madonna Center, CA

October 13 - 15, 2006

Find out more on page 8.

Join us

in our effort to nurture the practice of Sensory Awareness.

The basis of this work is to support the capacity within each person to be present and responsive to what is needed within ourselves, in our relationships with others and in our environment, and to contribute to a more connected and caring world from one moment to the next.

Please renew your membership for 2006 or become a new member of the Sensory Awareness Foundation. Our work is only possible with the help of your contributions.

(For more information see page 3.)

Presence and Absence

Seymour Carter shares his experiences exploring the elusive "I" through Sensory Awareness and psychotherapy.

By 1967, the year I first met Charlotte Selver, I had been working as a student trainer and group dynamics leader for at least three years. I was living at Esalen Institute, and I had been exposed to a panoply of psychotherapy systems. I was using the encounter group model, based on Will Schultz's confrontational methods, which was to search for and expose emotional lapses. The kicking and screaming models of Lowen's Bioenergetics were mixed in this witch's brew of dynamic group interaction. It was 60s pop psychology at its best and worst. The process, using several techniques, was a dramatic enactment of the client's emotional issues. Our main focus was on evoking aggression and sexuality in people who did not know how to handle aggression or sexuality.

One day in 1967, I walked into our main meeting room at Esalen, and I saw it had been arranged beautifully - wonderfully scented straw mats with Indian rugs on them, flowers placed in the room and, at the head of the room, a sheep skin rug with some kind of headset apparatus lying upon it. The room was empty and spacious. I thought to myself, "This is the first time at Esalen that am I encountering a display of some aesthetic taste and pleasure." Esalen was rustic and ragged at that time with very little taste displayed anywhere on the property. This scene in our meeting room made me

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wonder why the headset was there and what this group was about. I thought, “*I’m going to come back here and check it out.*”

I came back later and found Charlotte Selver directing a class with the headset on her head. She had difficulty hearing. In the room were many people standing with stones on their heads. I was intrigued by this scene, so I slipped in unnoticed, put a stone on my head, and began to follow Charlotte’s exploration. She was working with finding balance with our weight and with the weight of the stone. I was astonished that I could explore my sensory experience in such a delicate and accurate way. It seemed to deepen the texture of the awareness that I’d gotten from the psychotherapy, meditation, and LSD experiences I had been involved in since the early 60s. However, the Sensory Awareness practice was significantly more subtle and differentiated.

What amazed me was that Charlotte’s work seemed to link together many of the realms of my previous explorations, and it also provided me an avenue that my Zen practice had not at that time. The Zen Buddhist literature I was reading implied that my Zen practice was going to evoke a state of presence and consciousness that would be significantly different from the ordinary, but my experience was that it had not. The practice seemed to mostly consist of learning to sit in a painful and rigid posture.

During Sensory Awareness classes, we begin to tune in to our inner life: the pulses, the streaming of warmth, the shifts in balance, the rhythms of our breathing, etc. This inner search for the natural reactivity of our organism to its surroundings helps us recover from being out of touch with our organic life. For me, the Sensory Awareness practice of searching for our homeostatic balance was missing in all the other Western therapeutic methods in which I had been trained. None of the other practices had this piece of what happens when an organism comes to rest and balance.

Resting is an important part of presence, an important part of health and healing, of the rhythm of life. Sensory Awareness is dealing with our sensory/motor phenomena. By focusing on these phenomena, we are focusing on what I would say is the autonomic system of self-functioning. Many of our habitual muscular tension patterns are creating problems in our functioning. Sensory Awareness practice teaches us to tune into our organismically driven restorative activities. When we are tuned to the autonomic nervous system, the breathing patterns and the muscular tension patterns that are creating our daily aches and pains can be relieved. We enter into a discreet and distinct state of being.

In Sensory Awareness practices we are not focusing on dreams. We’re not focusing on emotions. We are not focusing on our inner narrative monologue. We are trying to enter into a

felt sense of presence. We’re trying to reach beyond our conditioned habits whereby we let the organism’s functions have foreground in our attention field. In standing, by paying close attention to how gravity is affecting our weight and our structure and how we are breathing in response to all of these phenomena, we begin to feel where balance can occur in us and how restoration can be activated.

Doing an experiment in sensing such as with gravity and weight is philosophically going from a universal to a particular. While exploring our weight, the experiments are directed to the experience of our weight in our joints and tissues directly, moment by moment. The teacher takes the universal notion, weight, and unpacks it into the here and now phenomenological experience. And the same strategy works in many domains of human experience. We take an instance like fear and ask the

person to describe exactly where and how they experience their fear. This intervention changes the client from being dissociated from their experience to being reflectively engaged in their experience, here and now. Thus, another key to the work is to guide a person into the here and now experience

of themselves or, as Charlotte might say, to the “immediacy of it all.”

In my study of psychotherapy, my belief is that Jung and Freud were not the major clinical geniuses of the 20th century. Their foundationalist conceptions of deeper motivational strata in human personalities – i.e.: unconscious drives, the collective unconscious, etc. – are seen to be culturally located constructions, not universals, but artifacts of a particular culture (see: *Unauthorized Freud: Doubters Confront a Legend*, edited by Frederick Crews, *The Jung Cult : Origins of a Charismatic Movement*, by Richard Noll). The critical clinical innovators, in my view, were Fritz Perls, Virginia Satir, Charlotte Selver, and Milton Erickson. They provided the strategies for intervening with the present moment’s emergent properties and taught us the power of the now to transform a person’s life.

I believe, both Gestalt Therapy and Sensory Awareness are forms of meditative trance. My understanding and implementation of this has been mostly helped by Milton Erickson’s work and studies. These practices clearly fit the Ericksonian definition of trance phenomena.

I think students of Sensory Awareness should look into Milton Erickson’s work, particularly his teaching of how to use one’s voice, rhetoric, and observations of clients’ behavior for enhancing the rapport between oneself as a guide and the person exploring their here and now awareness, for exploring their individual search.

Here I will quote from Milton Erickson and Ernest Rossi in “*Hypnotic Realities*” on two definitions of trance:

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were Fritz Perls, Virginia Satir,
Charlotte Selver, and Milton Erickson.
They provided the strategies for intervening
with the present moment’s emergent properties
and taught us the power of the now
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“Definition One: Trance viewed as inner-directed states: Trance phenomena may be understood in the broadest sense as inner-directed states wherein the multiple foci of attention so characteristic of our usual, everyday consciousness are restricted to relatively few inner realities. Because of this restricted focus, new learning can proceed more sensitively and intensely in trance when the patient is not interrupted by irrelevant stimuli and the limitations of his usual frames of reference.”

“Definition Two: Trance viewed as a highly-motivated state: Erickson carefully notes and utilizes a person’s personal psychodynamics and motivation for initiating and developing trance experience. It is a patient’s motivation that will bind them to their task of inner focus. It is this uniquely personal motivation that may account for some of the differences found between laboratory hypnosis, where standardized methods are used, and clinical hypnosis where the patient’s individuality is of essence in the approaches used for trance induction and utilization. Trance is thus an active process of unconscious learning somewhat akin to the process of latent learning or learning without awareness described in experimental psychology.”

The Sensory Awareness class leader is also in a trance state, in the sense that they are focusing on one aspect of their inner experience. While they’re leading the class, for example in standing, they are entering into a kind of trance, meaning, a disciplined inner focus. They focus on the minute details of their inner functioning and balancing in order to awaken the homeostatic processes in their organism. As they are doing that they are transmitting their discoveries to the class participants by articulating their search in the form of questions: “Can you feel what you are standing on? Are you able to respond to the floor? Do you feel anything in your legs and feet responding to the support under you?”

Charlotte’s work has taught me the importance of semantics and rhetoric, saying the right words in the right order, and the language of open options. For example, she would set up an experiment of touching your face, and then she would ask a question: “What do you experience?” That’s an open-ended question and rhetorically it allows the student to find out for themselves. She doesn’t say what’s going to happen. Now that

rhetorical ploy is expanded and repeated in the ways of phrasing our indications and questions. When I teach students to lead experiments in Sensory Awareness, their major handicap is that they frame their indications in stark dualism, i.e. “Pay attention to your body and not your thinking.”

In our classes we cannot say, “Do A and not B.” We can say, “Do you sense any distinction between A and B?” I try to frame my indications in open ended phrases, such as “Are you alert at this moment, or are you feeling somewhat depleted? You may find a mixture of those in you, alertness and depletion.”

I try to move people away from their “either/or” categories in terms of what they permit as an acceptable response. This comes from Korzybski’s General Semantics: “either/or” thinking is switched to “both/and” thinking to resolve dualism in our logic, opening the possibility that someone can feel a pain and not try to run away from it, to feel anguish and feel that it is part of themselves, not something separate from themselves.

Charlotte’s work also helped me become more accurate in my work as a Gestalt therapist. I began to be able to track micro-movements of the people, e.g., their breathing patterns. The sensing methodology seemed to be a practice based on what we now call our body or our sensory/motor expressions. When I work with clients, I pay attention to a suite of activities such as their word choice, their breathing patterns, where they are gazing, and the flash of emotion in their

eyes. I also observe the color of their features, how the blood flows in to their face, their vitality and the way they enter and leave the present moment.

Here is an example of how I bring the sensing work into a therapy session. Someone comes to me and they’re curled up in the chair telling me their story. I ask them to begin to explore themselves by sitting up more, letting them expand and take up more space in the world. Well, right away that’s a central existential conflict, because their posture is expressing their shrinking away from the world. They become anxious because they’ve developed no identity about sitting up and entering the world. When they sit up, their breathing is beginning to be difficult. They don’t have the breathing patterns that go with that confrontation; they begin to control their breath and not let themselves breathe freely. They are trying to manage the flooding of anxiety about being so exposed. Very gently, step by step



in micro-increments, I begin to encourage them to let in their emotions and to cope with their feelings, often feeling states which they have not let into awareness.

One more example would be to examine how the person looks at the world. I have found that following a person's gaze as they look at their surroundings also indicates what they're contacting in their surroundings and what they're avoiding. For example, often depressives walk around with a gaze that is fixed on the floor about six feet in front of them. What I ask them to do is to lift up their head and look around. They are afraid to look out, or they don't have the coping skills to look at the world. And these are central existential questions about meeting the world in order to cope with it. The examples I have just given are both examples of Sensory Awareness tactics applied to both the inner world of one's subjectivity and the connection to the outer world of people and things.

I had a severe heart attack in March of 2005. During the process I knew I was dying and was accepting dying quite gracefully and gratefully. I have lived a very full life and don't have any major unfinished business. I have accomplished my life goals and the only thing

left for me that I thought would be a good goal would be to have a good death. That of course means quick and sudden, and no lengthy lingering in a retirement home. So when I was having the heart attack I was accepting my dying as, "Okay, this fits. Dying is fitting now. Let's go."..... I do not want to live to 102, like Charlotte Selver.

I was rescued by a medical miracle – a catheter and stent treatment that is used for heart attacks currently – and three days later I was mostly okay. I've had worse acid trips. Yet I found that for the next six weeks or so, I was very resentful that I was rescued from what I thought to be a good death. So instead of fighting that resentment, I accepted it: I resented being alive. I was going against the grain of common sense that says that I should be happy to be alive. As I move out of the feeling of resentment and start enjoying life again, I can look back and realize I didn't split myself. I let myself be. In some sense that comes from Charlotte's work, meditation, and the hundreds of hours of psychotherapy I've done. In all of those experiences, the central theme is to accept who I am in the

moment and to not introduce the dichotomy of expecting to be someone else other than who I am.

Lest this all sound too deterministic, I'd like to close with a quote from the *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*: "Self: The elusive 'I' which has an alarming tendency to disappear when we try to introspect it." Now that I am an old man, I can say that my lifetime has been about exploring what it means to have a personal identity, and the curious nature of its presences and absences.



Seymour Carter, Gestalt teacher at Esalen for more than three decades, is a life-long student of the ever evolving models of personal identity. He teaches Gestalt Practice and Sensory Awareness in the US and Europe. He was a student of Fritz Perls at Esalen in the 60's, and has been a student of Charlotte Selver since 1967. He combines studies in family systems theory with Buddhism, Sensory Awareness and other Mind/Body oriented practices.