
Integrating Sensory Awareness and Somatic Psychotherapy

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Meeting Sensory Awareness

I was a dancer in my early days, studying modern dance for many years in New York and San Francisco. I then lived in Japan studying dance and eventually entering a Zen Buddhist Monastery there. Upon my return to the United States, I was looking for ways to integrate my different experiences of movement and of stillness. It was then that I began the study of Sensory Awareness in the classes of Charlotte Selver and Charles Brooks.

The work in the classes was very much like living in the monastery: Pay attention. Be conscious of what you are doing. Be present. Don't let your mind get carried away. I was thrilled and intrigued. I took as many classes as I could. I remember telling my Zen Master that I had found the American version of Zen. I could appreciate this simple practice of being more present in everything I did in my life.

Introduction to Reichian Therapy

When my marriage ended and I was left with a toddler and an infant, I felt the need for supportive therapy and found a therapist to work somatically with me. (I had never had success with talk therapists, and being a dancer I felt there had to be some way to integrate the body/mind.) I was so intrigued by the work of Wilhelm Reich that I began to study in this field. When Charles Brooks learned I was studying Reich, he was very pleased. Charles very much respected Reich and his work. I could see how the two ways of working were connected. I became certified in Reichian therapy in 1976 and was told by my mentor to begin offering therapy sessions. I earned my doctorate in Reichian psychology in 1979.

Almost without my knowing it, in my quest to be as real and honest as possible, I integrated what I received from Sensory Awareness into my clinical work. Eventually I found myself no longer calling it "Reichian Therapy." In my effort to be accurate, the name had evolved to "Reichian-based Awareness Therapy." Even though the name was unwieldy, I felt my work was good. In fact, it seemed to some that my work was a combination of meditation -- actually the sensory awareness work-- and energetic release.

Some years later, in 1984, I met Eva Reich, the daughter of Wilhelm Reich, the man whose work I had studied so much and to whom I felt we all owed a great debt. In our talking she asked me what I did. I told Eva that even though I had been trained and certified in Reichian Therapy, I had begun to integrate another kind of work into the basis of the therapeutic process. I told her that the work was called Sensory Awareness, that Charlotte Selver was my main teacher, and that her teacher in Europe had been Elsa Gindler. I was surprised and encouraged when she exclaimed, "Oh, how wonderful! My father would be so very glad!"

Eva then proceeded to tell me that she remembered being a child and going on hikes in the mountains with her mother and father and their best friends, Otto and Clare Fenichel (Otto and Wilhelm were both students of Freud), and that her father would keep asking them about the classes they took with Gindler. He would say, "Now tell me, what is it that you do?" In our subsequent talks over the years, Eva was very clear how she felt her father and his work were influenced by Gindler's work.. She stated several times that she did not think her father would have begun to work with the body, and especially the breath, if he had not been influenced by the Gindler way through so many of her students.

The Meeting of Sensory Awareness and Psychotherapy

In Sensory Awareness, there is nothing to teach. It is just the activity of experiencing and working to be ever more present for the moment. As my ability to be more present deepened, like in Zen, Sensory Awareness became more in me and I became more it. Of course, as I became ever more present in the moment for

myself, I became more present in the moment for my clients. My working with them changed: a lot of what I had been taught got dropped by the wayside. Not the knowledge, but the techniques. If I am going to be fully present and responsive to the moment and able to help another be more in the moment, it doesn't make sense to use a technique that I was taught some time ago. Sensory Awareness taught me the essence of being fresh and responding to what is happening at each moment... just what I learned in Zen.

Charlotte Selver was not a psychologist. She didn't put much stock in psychotherapy. In fact, she strongly felt that Sensory Awareness was enough and that if people continued with their sensing, they would resolve their issues. However, her teacher, Elsa Gindler, did have an interest in psychotherapy that came through her own colleague, Heinrich Jacoby.

Many psychotherapists of varying methods have learnt from Sensory Awareness. Many have knowingly incorporated it into their own psychotherapeutic work, Fritz Perls being one of the most notable. I think many more have unknowingly integrated Sensory Awareness into their therapeutic processes. In fact, I sincerely believe that every somatic psychotherapist includes Sensory Awareness in their work, whether they do it consciously or not. Personally, I don't see how we can be somatic psychotherapists without Sensory Awareness as our foundation.

Teaching Sensory Awareness in the Context of Somatic Psychology

In the over twenty-five years I taught at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco, I was able to establish courses in both Sensory Awareness and the Psychology of Wilhelm Reich. This was a wonderful ground for me to begin to create the kind of training I believe is necessary for somatic psychotherapy: to have a basis in Sensory Awareness and then continue the sensitive somatic inquiry into clinical applications in more professionally-oriented courses. The success of this work at CIIS gave me the support to create the doctoral program in somatic psychology when I co-founded Santa Barbara Graduate Institute. For me it was organic training - education from the inside out.

It is my experience that the Sensory Awareness component allows students to take the time to focus on tracking themselves and their own senses. Then, from that center, they can branch out into the clinical relationship. This greatly informs their clarity on transference and counter-transference and gives them skills to help ground themselves and know themselves in a very real, visceral way. Sensory Awareness work also helps them to share their experiences clearly and to draw on these experiences when working with their own clients and students.

It Works Both Ways

Sometimes I have clients who come to me for Sensory Awareness sessions, and our work turns into somatic psychotherapy. More often I have therapy clients who, realizing the benefit of the sensing work for their well being, pursue Sensory Awareness practice further by taking classes and workshops offered by Sensory Awareness leaders. Either way it works, and I'm ever grateful for the lineage, the leaders throughout the world, and their creativity and devotion to the simple work of somatic inquiry.

The latest growth and development in my own work over these past ten years is in the essential field of pre-natal and birth therapy. How wonderful and important it is when we can work soon with the early traumas! How invaluable it is to have Sensory Awareness skills to track oneself and also the infants, and to help the parents do so too. Since we are essentially working nonverbally with infants, it is even more crucial to have these sensory awareness skills.

Charlotte Selver was a dynamic force. More than she knew and more than most of us know, she has influenced many forms of psychotherapy, mainly somatic-oriented psychotherapy. We are indebted to the integrity of her work.

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