



SAFletter

Newsletter of the Sensory Awareness Foundation

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Finding Our Stature

This article is an excerpt from Charles Brooks' book Sensory Awareness - The Rediscovery of Experiencing. Originally published in 1974, it has been out of print for some years now. We are in the final stages of reprinting the book and hope to use the same on-demand procedure which enabled us to publish Waking Up. But because the original artwork has disappeared we are finding it hard to reprint the many pictures in a manner that does not compromise their quality. This seems to take more time than expected. Many of you have contributed to the reprinting of this book. The Institute of General Semantics has been especially generous. We thank you for your patience and want to assure you that Sensory Awareness will soon be available again, reprinted with the care this beautiful book deserves.



British Museum, London

And left only the living being. (From Charles Brooks' book Sensory Awareness.)

The difference between standing and sitting [...] lies almost entirely in the activity of the legs. In both cases head and trunk, or the totality of organs and organic functioning, are fully involved, either in discovering and coming to their own well-being, under the influence of gravity, air exchange, and the support below, or

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Our two most recent publications:

Waking Up

The Work of Charlotte Selver

by William C. Littlewood with Mary Alice Roche.

Talks about Sensory Awareness, Reports, Experiments, and Exchanges with Her Students.

Every Moment is a Moment

A Journal with Words of Charlotte Selver from her 102 years of living and over 75 years of offering the work of Sensory Awareness.

(For ordering information see page 9.)

Exploration of Sensory Awareness and the Marks of Time

by Stefan Laeng-Gilliatt

From the very beginnings of what we today call Sensory Awareness, many of its proponents have taken a great interest in social issues. When I first started working on this text for the opening of the 2004 conference Sensory Awareness: Exploring the Roots of Peace, I wanted to review the history of Sensory Awareness in that light. But I soon realized that this is an ambitious project and would require a lot of research. Still, I decided to take at least a glimpse at this topic that deserves much more attention. As I was getting deeper into the subject matter, I started to see that along with the commitment to social justice came other time-bound dispositions. Sensory Awareness is conditioned by the historical and cultural circumstances in which its originators found themselves some eighty years ago. Some of those traits are certainly still beneficial but others might "not be needed" anymore. The following article poses ques-

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EXPLORATIONS... (continued)

tions that will sound provocative to some. However, they grow out of a deep respect for our teachers and their findings.

Within the framework of Sensory Awareness, there has been from the beginning an emphasis on activities which have a calming effect – spending much time in silence, lying on the floor and giving our weight to it, using the touch of our hands to help calm the head and the mind, and so forth. Gindler understood that quiet – or peace, if you will – is a prerequisite for discovery and change. Healthy activity has its basis in quiet within, from which we can respond to the often disquieting happenings around us.

Interestingly, when we look at the time and place in which this practice has its roots, we will find that it was in a chaotic Germany in and between two terrible wars. The time between these wars was a time of great creativity and renewal in many ways. In the nineteen teens and twenties, a number of “Gymnastik” schools emerged in Germany, which were devoted to overcome the rigid forms of physical education and find a more natural way of exercising. One

of the pioneers of this movement was Charlotte Selver’s teacher, Elsa Gindler. This is not the place to discuss how Gindler developed her way of working but I find it intriguing to reflect on the fact that Sensory Awareness developed in a time marked with extreme difficulty, poverty, hunger, chaos – and danger.

In my research for this article I came upon a draft for a talk Gindler gave at a meeting of the “Deutscher Gymnastik Bund” in Munich, in February of 1931. In this draft she writes: “It is high time to bring an end to the “belligerent actions” in the field of physical education. Together, we should focus on ending practices which have really nothing to do with physical education. It is time to stop evaluating running only by measuring time or the distance run. We have to also take into account the condition in which the runner crosses the finish line.”

I don’t want to suggest that I understand the complexity of that time or how Gindler’s approach emerged from it. Still, I look at that time and place and I wonder how it all came together. Munich, where Charlotte Selver studied *Bode Gymnastik* in the early twenties, was the breeding ground of National Socialism and by the time Gindler wrote these lines, it had already spread throughout Germany. By 1933 the Nazis had come to power in Berlin, where Gindler had her home and where she worked. Some of Gindler’s colleagues collaborated

with the Nazis and it became increasingly impossible to communicate. But others did not: When the “Deutscher Gymnastik Bund” was dissolved in 1933 and its members integrated into the “Reichsverband Deutscher Turn-, Sport-, und Gymnastiklehrer im NS-Lehrerbund”, there was a special meeting to mark this occasion in Berlin. At the end of the gathering the “Horst-Wessel Lied” was sung – the anthem of the Nazis. All of the Gymnastik teachers of Berlin stayed seated, none of them raised their arms to the “Hitler Gruss” (Source: Sophie Ludwig’s book on Elsa Gindler. See below). After the

Nazis took power, Gindler retreated from her public life but continued to work quietly. She helped many people who were persecuted and put her life on the line.

Are these dramatic circumstances in which Sensory Awareness has its roots still reflected in the work today? I would like to propose that they are.

I know we are tempted to think that our practice is pure and somehow free of conditioning, as it deals with the exploration of nature. But more and more I discover that this is not true at all. Not only are we as individuals conditioned, but science itself – and Gindler

often spoke in terms of science about her work – is shaped by the time and place out of which it grows. This practice in many ways still has the flavor of a response to a particular time and place: Germany between two wars and also during the second world war. What is still relevant for us today that was relevant in the early 20th century in Germany? There are similarities for sure. We are in a time of war and we live in a country which aspires to world dominance. But there are also many differences and I wonder more and more if some of the conditioning with which this work is being offered, some of the basic assumptions about who we are and how we “naturally” function, are no longer accurate and need to be revised. I don’t dare to answer these questions thoroughly but I would like to present some examples of possible conditioning and propose alternatives.

When we were preparing for the Sensory Awareness conference, I received an email from a fellow Sensory Awareness leader. In it, she described her experience of a long-term study group with Charlotte Selver in the 70s: “Charlotte was quite clear that she wanted her students to meld with the Zen practice as much as possible. She cautioned us not to “interfere” with the students’ practice. She urged us not greet them or engage in conversation, to make the least noise possible (“is it necessary to clink your fork on your plate while eating?”), to do community work (don’t be a burden to the community), and



This unidentified photograph is from a roll of negatives found in Charlotte Selver’s archives. She must have taken these photos on one of her first trips back to Germany in the early fifties.

EXPLORATIONS... (continued)

to pretty much mind our own business. She also told us specifically that any emotions that might emerge with the Work were to be "left alone." A show of comfort or empathy was not appropriate to the Work. As a result, our group became one of determinedly separate individuals who had little idea who their partners/housemates/classmates were in the entire world outside our classroom."

At first glance, much of this makes perfect sense. As a long-time student of Buddhism I understand that little contact and minimizing social interactions simplify life and support the practice. But suddenly it occurred to me that Charlotte's most intense time of studying with Gindler, the years between 1933 and 1938, were a time of great danger. Charlotte's world became smaller and smaller. She couldn't work anymore. She lived in the schoolhouse where her husband, Heinrich Selver, was a teacher. She studied intensely with Gindler, driving her car through Berlin to Gindler's studio while fearing for her life as she was passing through Nazi road blocks. Once in Gindler's classroom, the students worked together but they did not socialize. They tried to know as little about one another as possible, as not to endanger each other, in case they were questioned by the authorities. Could it be that this war-time setting became deeply ingrained into Charlotte and somehow carried over into the way she was teaching?

We might find that there are further ramifications, as well, of this type of withdrawal. It might be that one reason why this work is so little known, despite its permeating the somatic practices we are familiar with today is because, for many of its early years, its proponents, namely Gindler and Jacoby, had to be careful not to draw the attention of authorities, be it in Germany or in Switzerland, where Jacoby lived after 1933. Both Gindler and Jacoby had to keep a lid on their teaching careers for many years and could only work with a small circle of students. This tendency to work in secrecy seems to have carried over into the present and may have also furthered a kind of self-centeredness and even isolation, coupled with a sense of exclusiveness. To be visible, to stand out, is not something that seems to belong in this work.

It also seems not to belong to this work, to be visible to the world as a practice alongside other somatic practices, offered by leaders who can actually make a living. Although many professionals in related somatic practices know about the importance of Gindler and Selver and their work, very few people know about our work, let alone take classes and workshops. Success seems to be suspicious and is often seen to be synonymous with "watering down" the purity of the work. Charlotte, who thankfully was very successful, paid a high

price for her achievements: In the fifties, when her practice really took off, some of her students urged her to start a foundation. These first attempts to create an organization much like the SAF today, which would publish writings, audio tapes and other materials, possibly even offer a training program and generally promote the work, were completely discredited by Charlotte's teachers, Elsa Gindler and Heinrich Jacoby. Reasons given to Charlotte were that Gindler had long realized that training people was not the way to go, and that as long as Jacoby had not published anything, how could anybody even dare thinking about publications. And, more generally, she argued that the development of the human potential could never be achieved by appealing to the masses, through marketing, etc.

The rebuff and subsequent falling out with Gindler and Jacoby was very traumatic for Charlotte, and she was conflicted about success and the validity of her efforts for the rest of her life (especially when it came to passing on the work to future teachers/leaders). Is this past still haunting us today? While I can understand Gindler's concerns to a degree, I do think that it is time to revisit some of these assumptions.

If, indeed, being on one's own and not "collaborating" with the world at large (or for that matter, with representatives of related practices) is part of the belief system of Sensory Awareness, how can this practice have an impact in a time that is already marked by tendencies of fragmentation and self-centeredness? Could Sensory Awareness help us explore our interdependence as well as our nature

as individual organisms? Our individual freedom – and what some call the American way of life – is very dear to us. As individuals and as nations, we have a tendency to believe that we have to be the first, the fastest, the strongest, if we are to survive. But this is not how nature works. Natural processes are very much based on interdependence and mutual support. In a way, this knowledge has always been a central part of both Gindler's and Jacoby's work, as in its emphasis on gravity and the support offered by the earth.

It may now be time to put an end to the "belligerent actions" against the greater organism of our communities and the world community. It may be time to stop measuring success only by the achievements of an individual or a single nation. Maybe we need to take into account in which condition we find ourselves and the world, as we pursue our interests. It seems so hard for us to understand that our well-being depends on the well-being of our neighbors and the world in which we live.

It may be time to examine such tendencies and explore new ways of working together. I propose that we explore not



A study of what can breathe life into sitting.
(From Charles Brooks' book *Sensory Awareness*)

J.R. Harris, Egyptian Art, London: Spring Books, 1966

EXPLORATIONS... (continued)

only ourselves as individual organisms but also how we function within community and as – if I dare say so – an organism of humans, within the greater “organism” of planetary life. What condition do we find ourselves in as we function together?

Sensory Awareness has great potential for such explorations and social responsibility has always been part of this practice and important to its proponents. Gindler and her students very much looked after one-another – and that’s a legacy we would certainly not want to give up. Sophie Ludwig writes in her book: “Gindler was convinced – even before Hitler came to power – that National Socialism had to be rejected, even fought. She took a stand against injustice, inhumanity, and deception. . . . She supported people who were persecuted for political or racist reasons . . . She tried to bring to people’s attention the things that happened in Germany that should have made it impossible to be a National Socialist or to even just go along with it because it was easier.”

Mieke Monjou’s account, published in the second SAF Bulletin about Elsa Gindler, illustrates this: “Elsa Gindler and I soon realized that we were of one mind, i.e., opposed to Hitler, his politics, and his brutality; we helped our Jewish friends as best we could. Often I would come to class early, or Elsa Gindler would ask me to say afterward. We would exchange information about some new atrocity, some radio reports from the BBC or the Voice of America [...] or sometimes just a few words of comfort about some new gleam of hope. During the classes themselves Elsa Gindler had to be very careful. They were open to the public, and the public included police-informers. Politically, Elsa Gindler had her own ideas, but she had to keep up the appearance of “purely pedagogic interest” in her teaching. So she spoke cautiously; but for those who had ears to hear, what she said was daring, thought-provoking, and rousing.”

The mutual support continued after the war. At that point, some of Gindler’s students who had left Germany could give back to her. Charlotte and her colleagues in the US started to send aid packages. Lists with the contents of such shippings to Germany can be found in Charlotte’s calendars and there are also letters of great gratitude from Elsa Gindler to Charlotte.

Even though these people had not been able to stay in touch for many years, their sense of community was strong and they started to help as soon as possible.

What does the world need today? What does the practice of Sensory Awareness have to offer to the world? A colleague wrote when I was working on the introduction to the conference: “I guess I am trying to find links from our offerings in this peace workshop to people who are engaged with social change. [...] Also, it’s hard to use the word “Peace” in times like these. All the time, I think of the Iraqis and the American soldiers, and I wonder why we don’t jump up and put out the fires, somehow, before we continue to meet in meditation groups and in these peace conferences...”

The Buddha also spoke about fires that have to be extinguished. But his way of putting an end to suffering in the world was through insight into our own inner workings. He spoke about putting out the fires of greed, hatred and delusion. I strongly believe that both are needed. Political action without an understanding of our personal, cultural, and biological conditioning will not root out greed, hatred, and delusion in us and in the world. That is where our practice can be of immense benefit. I believe that we can learn much about being in the world as we explore our nature – as individuals and as community – through Sensory Awareness. All the while, we also have to act from our place of limited understanding, and do the best we can to help alleviate suffering in the world.

We live in a world filled with conflict. We have conflicts within ourselves and in relation to others. How can we find peace? Sensory Awareness is a practice of inquiry. At its best it brings us to our senses, so that we can see, and hear, and taste, and gain a sound understanding of what is going. From that place we can act – not by following instructions or ideologies but by recognizing “what is needed”, as Charlotte often put it.

* Sophie Ludwig: *Elsa Gindler - von ihrem Leben und Wirken*, Hans Christians Verlag, Hamburg 2002

SAF Publications

1) **A TASTE OF SENSORY AWARENESS**, by Charlotte Selver. An overview of the work, with an edited transcript of a session from the 1987 NY Open Center workshop. 38 pages.

5) **ELSA GINDLER, Vol. 1**. Memorial to the originator of the work we know as Sensory Awareness. Excerpts from Gindler’s letters, an article by her, and reports from her students; including Ch. Selver. 44 pages, with photos (1978). *

6) **ELSA GINDLER, Vol. 2**. Memories from Gindler students and an article about Heinrich Jacoby, innovative educator and colleague of Gindler. 44 pages, with photos. *

8) **ELFRIEDE HENGSTENBERG**. This issue embraces her own studies with Gindler and Jacoby, her work with children, and biographical notes. She was closely involved with Emmi Pikler’s discoveries. 46 pages, with photos.

9) **HEINRICH JACOBY**. The Work and influence of Gindler’s longtime collaborator, summaries of his books, interviews with his students, including his editor and colleague Sophie Ludwig. 46 pages with photos.

10) **EMMI PIKLER**. Dr. Emmi Pikler, Hungarian pediatrician, whose revolutionary practice and philosophy about earliest childhood upbringing has been very influential in Europe. Contains extensive selections from Dr. Pikler’s first book, *Peaceful Babies - Contented Mothers*, and a paper by Judith Falk, M.D., then director of the Emmi Pikler Methodological Institute for Residential Nurseries. 48 pages, with many photos of young children.

11) **CHARLOTTE SELVER, Vol. 1**. Sensory Awareness And Our Attitude Toward Life. Collected lectures and texts. Containing: Sensory Awareness and Our Attitude Toward Life; Sensory Awareness & Total Functioning; Report on Work in Sensory Awareness & Total Functioning; To See Without Eyes...; On Breathing; On Being in Touch With Oneself.