

## Getting It: The Shift Towards Assisted Self-Discovery

Yesterday, I was talking to a famous psychotherapist. (No names, please!) I was trying to explain Hakomi to him and he just couldn't get it. He just couldn't get it. He didn't get the shift I'd made.

There's several ways to look at this shift. The shift for me is from thinking of my work as psychotherapy, thinking of it the way a professional psychotherapist would. That person might see his role as: "I'm an expert. I'm a professional. I will diagnose your problem. I will listen to you talk. I will diagnose your problem and then I'm going to try some procedures and give you things to do that will cure the problem." In professional realms, psychotherapy is thought of as a form of medicine. I think of my work very differently.

I think that my work is to help people understand themselves, by discovering things about themselves they were not conscious of. I agree with Ramachandran's<sup>1</sup> idea that consciousness is choice; it's function is to give you time to deliberate and choose.<sup>2</sup> When you're conscious, you can delay your reactions. You can reason out your options and decide. Your habits, feelings, reactions and instincts are contained by consciousness, or sometimes can be. Otherwise, you are operating automatically, without thinking, usually without even being aware of what you're doing. (I'm typing that was right now.) I see my work as helping you to bring those automatic, unconscious actions into consciousness and choice.

I want to help you discover the habits, memories, feelings and beliefs that are run your behavior and your life, the ones that you're not conscious of. I want to help you discover the way you're set up to automatically perceive the world and react to the world.

There was a movie called *A Thousand Clowns*. In the movie, this guy, played by Jason Robards Jr., went down to 42<sup>nd</sup> St. and Broadway one lunchtime. People were streaming by him as he stood there. Every ten seconds or so, he would say, to no one in particular, "I'm sorry!" The people who were just walking by and happened to be in earshot of him would automatically say things like, "Oh, that's okay." "Forget it." "Don't worry about it."

That's the way we're wired up. We're wired up to react without thinking. After all, below the surface, the neocortical surface that is, we're just primates. Like them, we're aware of things, but we're more complex in our decision making. To have consciousness is a special gift and it requires special conditions for its use. You can't be conscious in the heat of action. Not when you're doing gymnastics or figure skating or typing real fast. For actions that require speed, thinking too much can mess up what you're trying to do. We all have to rely on our reactions to get through this life. We all have to rely on that part of our brain that is our animal inheritance. Animals have to count on their reactions to get 'em through. Sometimes, we do too! And sometimes we need to think things through, because sometimes our reactions will get us in trouble. Sometimes, impulse control is called for. And sometimes, we'll need to discover what's running us, in order to change.

"We're all beasts when it comes down to it."<sup>3</sup>

So, I see my job as a therapist is to help clients discover these things, discover what's running them, discover the memories and the emotions and the beliefs that they came to own that now own them, the deep, unconscious core material that shapes all their experiences. I assist in that discovery process. I help. If that's the client's sincere commitment, if that's what he or she wants

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<sup>1</sup> Phantoms in the Brain.

<sup>2</sup> An excellent book on this subject is, Lehrer, Jonah (2009) *How We Decide*, New York: Mariner Books

<sup>3</sup> Richard, Lord Buckley 1906-1960, on one of his records.

to do, to work to discover the things that run them, then my work will help. I know how to make those deep things come into consciousness.

When those things are in consciousness, there's a chance that the pain they cause can be eased, a chance that the confusion they created can be made clear, that they can be integrated, become a meaningful and benign, that healing and wholeness can happen. The old stuff doesn't have to run you anymore. Consciousness is choice. Choice is the freedom to change.

If someone wants to do that, I can help them. In contrast to the typical kinds of psychotherapy, I can usually help them very quickly. It doesn't take a lot of time. I don't have to hear a history. I don't have to diagnose and/or categorize people. I only have to really be there and be sincerely caring. And I have to have a way notice a client's habits, the "quality" of the client's behavior. In other words, I have to be able to get something about how they're organized. I do that by paying very close attention to the client's nonverbal behavior. I look for what I call, indicators. A simple example would be a habit like shrugging the shoulders.

Once I spot an indicator, I have to decide how to use that indicator in an experiment. When I do experiments, I ask the client to relax, go inward and be prepared to notice his or her reaction to something I'll do or say. I talk about the client's state of mind during an experiment as, mindfulness. Mindfulness is a state that allows discovery.

I'd like to talk for a moment about the hypnagogic state of consciousness and how it relates to mindfulness and gaining access to unconscious material

Hypnagogia is defined<sup>4</sup> as "*Of, relating to, or occurring in the state of intermediate consciousness preceding sleep*" Let's focus on the phrase "*a state of intermediate consciousness*". They're referring to a state that's intermediate between being awake and being asleep. It's a dreamlike state in which "hypnagogic hallucinations" occur. While we're thinking about an intermediate state of consciousness, consider this, from Laura Colgin's article, *On the same wavelength—literally*:<sup>5</sup>

"...We investigated how gamma waves in particular were involved in communication across cell groups in the hippocampus. What we found could be described as a radio-like system inside the brain. The lower frequencies are used to transmit memories of past experiences, and the higher frequencies are used to convey what is happening where you are right now."

Gamma waves: "the higher frequencies....convey what's happening where you are right now." "The lower frequencies....memories of past experiences." I suppose that one's mind could drift between these two "stations", when the situation isn't calling for concentration on either. Colgin talks about how these two "stations" could overlap in some cases, interfering with each other. She suggests that schizophrenia may be something like that, where the person's mind is not able to separate memories from the present. That's certainly what happens in trauma.

Here's what I think happens when I ask a client in a therapy session to become mindful. I'm asking for an intermediate state. I'm asking for a state in which the client is both focused on what he or she is experiencing right now, but is also free to allow images, feelings and sensations to arise from the past. I don't say it that way. I simply tune my voice and pace in such a way as to suggest that the client relax into an hypnagogic state. It's not hypnosis per se. I'm not suggesting anything in particular except that the client be in that state. In a way, I'm asking the client to be present to his or her own immediate present experience, and also to be available to thoughts, feelings, images or sensations that spontaneously come into consciousness in reaction to the interventions I make. I want to evoke reactions that bring old, emotionally charged memories into consciousness.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/hypnagogic>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.ntnu.no/news/on-the-same-wavelength> and in the Excerpts.

I want those evoked experience to be felt as one might feel things in a dream. I want the power and cooperation of the unconscious. When I use mindfulness, I'm asking the client to allow "communication across cell groups in the hippocampus"<sup>6</sup>. That is, I'm asking that the client to allow the past to come alive again.

About this idea of using hypnagogia: I would say that a lot of psychotherapeutic methods use it in similar ways. Psychomotor, the Pesso Boyden System, Hypnotherapy certainly, Gestalt in some cases, and probably others that could be mentioned.

So, when I talk about using mindfulness I do not mean it in the meditative sense, even though there is one important aspect that is the same: the client's openness to letting things come. Whereas in meditation, the idea is to let things come into consciousness and stay aware of them, without controlling them or letting them control you. You let them arise and fade, simply noticing it happen. You stay focused on your present experience without interfering. It's an extinction process. It slowly reduces self-centered concerns. It works. In my work, I use the openness of mindfulness to evoke painful memories of formative experiences. I use it to bring those memories into consciousness with all the power of a dream, so that the damage they have done can be repaired. My work is not about enlightenment, just lightening the load.

So I've named several things that are essential now. The client's commitment to self-discovery. The use of mindfulness and experiments to create those discoveries. And, there's two more things. There are things that you have to do when the discovery has an emotional component, a strong emotional component, and the person gets carried away by it. "Triggered." You have to know how to handle that. The other thing you have to know is how to put yourself in the right state of mind so that you're giving the person the best chance to discover. Your state of mind has to be very present centered and nonverbally aware. You'll have to be able to focus on what's going on in front of you and not get lost in ideas. You have to be completely calm, so the client can relax. And most important, you must feel caring<sup>7</sup>. That means you'll have to put your prejudices and your discontents aside.

There's a scene in a I want to mention. The movie is *Harold and Maud*. In the scene, an older woman, Maud, who had been in a concentration camp is sitting with a troubled young guy, Harold. Harold notices the numbers tattooed on Maud's wrist and he understands what they are. He asks her, "Do you like people?" She perks up and says, "Oh, yes! I love people! They're my species." Feeling our common humanity, our species-ness, that's essential to doing this work. You can't be superior! You can't be distant! You have to be engaged! You have to embrace the truth of our connectedness and the reality of non-separation.<sup>8</sup> This is the great discovery of Buddha: we are not separate. "All is without a separate self." My old friend Carver, quantum physicist told me once, his work showed that, "nothing can be separated out." When you open to that, when you feel another's emotions as your own, only then you able to do authentic work.

So, what I've been describing is more than just a little different from the psychotherapy I knew of as a youth. I'll talk more about that later.

Okay! Let's end this part with a cartoon. You ready? Okay! On the back page of the New Yorker magazine, every week they have a cartoon contest. They give you a graphic and contestants have to send in a caption. So, the graphic was this: a judge is looking down at a lawyer who's before his bench. The lawyer is standing next to a guy in a clown suit and next to that guy is a little dog in a

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<sup>6</sup> I can't remember where I read that. It was someone cited in these footnotes.

<sup>7</sup> Jaak Panksepp writes about CARE as one of the seven primary process emotional states. That's the one you need to be in. His writing appears in many places, the latest being in the book, *The Healing Power of Emotion*, edited by Diana Fosha, Daniel J. Siegel, and Marion F. Solomon.

<sup>8</sup> For this, I would recommend *The Neurobiology of We* by Daniel J. Siegel.

clown suit. The winning caption, sent in by someone had the judge saying, “How many surprise witnesses do you have in that little car, counselor?” [laughter]

Don’t you love it! Whew! Every once in a while, I get hypnagogically invaded by a cartoon.

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