

The Language of the Body

Introduction

It has been nearly 50 years since Alexander Lowen published his first book, the *Physical Dynamics of Character Structure*, which later was released under the title *The Language of the Body*. This edition combines both titles. In this seminal work, Lowen outlined the basic tenets of bioenergetic analysis, including a discussion of characterology from a bioenergetic perspective. His subsequent works have expanded on the themes first introduced in this book but, unlike many authors who significantly revised their work over time and often even reversed their earlier positions, Lowen remained constant. Hence, the basic understanding of the entire system of bioenergetic analysis is here essentially in its entirety. It is also expressed more deeply, intended for a professional as well as lay audience, than many of his later works that are more focused on specific topics and less technically-detailed in their exposition. For anyone wanting an in-depth exposure to the theoretical underpinnings of bioenergetic analysis as a whole system, this is the book that I would unwaveringly recommend as a starting place. In fact, when I first encountered this book, I was an undergraduate student searching for a meaningful career path. Reading it was highly influential in my choice to attend graduate school in clinical psychology. Not surprisingly, over the years I have heard many other mental health professionals share similar stories of how this book influenced their career choice. Having reread the book after over 40 years since I first encountered it, I am thoroughly impressed with how current and still amazingly innovative are the ideas contained in this volume.

Although the basic principles in this book remain solid, much has changed in our culture since it was first published in 1958. Lowen commented in this volume that many issues related to Freud's original understanding of the formation of symptoms of hysteria had abated over time and were no longer widely applicable. Similarly, much of the current cultural milieu has changed since Lowen first wrote this book. For example, personality and character issues related to overly severe toilet-training, which used to be all too common, have diminished. Although the closely reciprocal relationship between character structure and culture requires that the prevalence and distribution of certain character structures will inevitably change as culture changes, the basic human needs that shape character structure remain constant. However, these may be expressed differently based on evolving cultural contexts. In this regard, the principles Lowen described are universal and timeless, though some of the details of how they are expressed may differ from the era when Lowen first wrote these ideas.

Also, originally bioenergetic analysis was conceived within, and as a challenge to, the psychoanalytic tradition, primarily stemming from the work of Wilhelm Reich as well as other progressive psychoanalytic thinkers. It provided a way to go beyond the limitations of talk-oriented psychoanalysis, which was focused on attaining cognitive insight that often did not lead to actual positive changes in living life, through an approach meant to address incorporating insight into bodily and experientially changes enhancing quality of life, recognizing that intellectualized insight alone is not sufficient to result in positive changes. Today's psychotherapy climate has evolved considerably with much of psychoanalytic thought having now been discarded by most mainstream mental health practitioners, being replaced by the currently popular cognitive-behaviorism that is superficial in its understanding, focusing on short-term symptom removal as a goal and having little underlying sense of the profound issues involving personality and character disturbances that may continue to create symptoms. These disturbances, though pervasive, are largely untreated in contemporary psychotherapy and instead are masked by a proliferation of medications that largely preclude, rather than foster, the growth of human potential. In addition, cognitive-behavioral approaches essentially ignore the body and its experience in favor of privileging mentation and focus on overt behavior change without concern for deeper meaning of symptoms. Simultaneously there has been a development of numerous approaches to personal growth that focus on the body and the physical dimensions of human experience, such as the release of muscular tensions through massage therapy, but these have primarily occurred without any in-depth understanding of the mind-body unity, which fuses somatic embodiment with psychological dynamics. Neither psychological approaches that fail to address the body, nor body-based approaches that fail to address psychology are alone

adequate to achieve sustainable change for many of the most vexing problems treated by mental health professionals.

Mind-body unity is the most fundamental bioenergetic analytic concept. The unique heritage of a Reichian tradition has been maintained and furthered by bioenergetic analysis, a tradition in which bodywork is inextricably grounded within a deep understanding of personality and character dynamics, while simultaneously these psychodynamics are grounded within the lived body. Without such a holistic approach, addressing the full-range of human experience, change is likely to be short-lived for those whose issues are more personality and character driven.

Although a vibrant school of psychotherapy with international reach has emerged out of Lowen's pioneering work, only a relatively small, but dedicated, cadre of practitioners is now formally trained as bioenergetic therapists. Bioenergetic analysis remains relatively unknown by the mainstream of mental health practitioners and, for some who know of it, its focus on encountering and reclaiming powerful feelings is a source of fright rather than excitement over the possible liberation that can result. Bringing this classic book back into print will hopefully help rectify this situation.

It is also a well-deserved tribute to Lowen, a man who has personally influenced numerous patients and several generations of bioenergetic therapists through his many years of providing psychotherapy and conducting training programs, as well as through being a persuasive author. I include myself as one of the fortunate ones to have both experienced bioenergetic therapy directly from Lowen and to have attended a number of his week-long training programs. Perhaps even more emblematic has been Lowen's tenacity and humility in living the principals aptly expressed in this book. Well into his nineties, Lowen continued to provide psychotherapy and training, as well as to personally work with his own daily regimen of bioenergetic exercises. Recently, I asked Lowen about his amazingly productive career and the personal sacrifices that I thought such productivity must have entailed. His answer was succinct and thoroughly congruent with his approach to bioenergetic analysis: "It gave me pleasure." This, after all, reflects the goal of bioenergetic analysis, freeing the organism to experience pleasure in an expansive and unimpeded way of living congruent with mind-body unity.

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Preface

The movements of expression in the face and body . . . serve as the first means of communication between the mother and her infant. . . . The movements of expression give vividness and energy to our spoken words. They reveal the thoughts and intentions of others more truly than do words, which may be falsified. . . . The free expression by outward signs of an emotion intensifies it. On the other hand, the repression as far as this is possible, of all outward signs softens our emotions. He who gives way to violent gestures will increase his rage; he who does not control the signs of fear will experience fear in a greater degree; and he who remains passive when overwhelmed with grief loses his best chance of recovering elasticity of mind.

Charles Darwin, 1872
The Expression of Emotion in Man and Animals

We are witnessing today an attack upon psychoanalysis from psychiatrists and others who do not deny its basic principles. The criticism stems rather from disappointment with the results of psychoanalytic therapy. For even if one leaves aside the serious problems of cost, time and inconvenience, the hoped-for changes in personality, feeling and behavior frequently do not materialize. True, many patients are helped; some are improved. But the number of patients who spend years in analysis or go from one analyst to another without any significant change in their misery, their dissatisfaction, or their real problems is alarming.

Just the other day, I was consulted by a young woman who had spent four years in analysis and more than one year in another form of therapy. Her comment about these previous experiences is typical.

“The thing I went for wasn’t really changed. I always felt that my capacity for feeling was greater than what I experienced. While analysis helped me to understand many things, I did not feel more. In this I was disappointed.”

In the face of this situation the reaction from analytic psychiatrists is mixed. Some offer more elaborate formulations while others plead for simple common sense. Unfortunately, neither one of these approaches offers a solution to the problem. Nor can one blame Freud that the great insights he offered the world have proved relatively ineffective in overcoming the severe emotional disturbances from which many individuals suffer. Freud, himself, did not hold out this promise. He knew the limitations of his technique.

The situation in which psychoanalysis finds itself today is like that of any other young medical discipline. Can one compare the results achieved by surgery now with those of one hundred years ago? Improvement results from changes in techniques, from a better comprehension of the problem and from heightened skills. If the analysts of our day are to be blamed for the present situation it is only because of their reluctance to modify their traditional procedures.

The history of psychoanalysis is not devoid of experimenters and thinkers. While most have devoted themselves to minor extensions of theory, several, notably Ferenczi and Wilhelm Reich, introduced important innovations in technical procedures. Ferenczi’s “activity technique” or “analysis from below” attempted to deal with the difficult character problems which even then defied the psychoanalytic method. Reich’s contributions we shall discuss more fully in the course of this study.

The problem which psychoanalysis faces arises from the fact that the analyst deals with body sensations and body feelings on a verbal and mental level, for the subject matter of analysis is the feeling and behavior of the individual. His ideas, fantasies and dreams are explored only as a means to comprehend and reach the feelings and to influence the behavior. Can we not

conceive the possibility that there are other ways and means to change feelings and actions? In a letter to W. Fleiss in 1899, Freud revealed his constant interest in this question.

“From time to time I visualize a second part of the method of treatment—provoking patients’ feelings as well as their ideas, as if that were quite indispensable.”

If Freud failed to devise a method of treatment which would carry out this idea, that failure can be ascribed to the difficulty inherent in the body-mind relationship. So long as the concept of body-mind duality influences one’s thinking, that difficulty is insuperable. We can surmise that Freud struggled with this problem all his life. Out of that struggle came the clear formulations which constitute ego psychology. But the same problem confronts the analysts of today as sharply as it did Freud.

It is not my intention in this preface to suggest the answer to this big question. Rather I would like to explain the thesis which underlies this study and which points the way to the solution of this problem. Analysts are aware of the identity of many somatic processes with psychological phenomena. The field of psychosomatic medicine is full of such references. Implied in this identity is the concept that the living organism expresses itself in movement more clearly than in words. But not alone in movement! In pose, in posture, in attitude and in every gesture, the organism speaks a language which antedates and transcends its verbal expression. Further there are a number of specific studies which correlate the body structure and physique with emotional attitudes. These can be made as much subject to the analytic technique as dreams, slips of the tongue and the results of free association.

If body structure and temperament are related, as anyone who studies human nature can determine, the question then is: Can one change the character of an individual without some change in the body structure and in its functional motility? Conversely, If one can change the structure and improve its motility can we not effectuate those changes in temperament which the patient demands?

In his emotional expression, the individual is a unity. It is not the mind which becomes angry nor the body which strikes. It is the individual who expresses himself. So we study how a specific individual expresses himself, what is the range of his emotions and what are his limits. It is a study of the motility of the organism for the emotion is based on an ability “to move out.” Here is a clue to the relative failure of psychoanalysis. It helps comparatively little to understand why one behaves as one does. The individual afraid to dive into the water may know very well that he won’t be hurt. We must understand and learn to overcome the fear of movement.

If the determinants of personality and character are physically structured, must not the therapeutic endeavor equally be physically oriented? Knowledge is but the prelude to action. To be more effective, the analytic therapy should provide for both understanding and movement within the therapeutic situation. The principles of theory and technique which form the framework of this new approach constitute what we call Bioenergetic Analysis and Therapy.

The one man primarily responsible for enlarging and extending the scope of the analytic technique to include the physical expression and activity of the patient was Wilhelm Reich. Much as one may disagree with Reich’s later work, this development constitutes one of the major contributions to psychiatry. My indebtedness to Wilhelm Reich, who was my teacher, is expressed by ample references to his ideas in this volume. On the other hand, bioenergetic therapy is independent of Reich and his followers and differs from Reich’s theories and techniques in many important aspects—some of which are set forth in this book.

It may be interesting to point out the differences between bioenergetic therapy and the traditional psychoanalytic techniques. First and foremost, the study of the patient is unitary. The bioenergetic therapist analyzes not only the psychological problem of the patient as will every analyst, but also the physical expression of that problem as it is manifested in the body structure and movement of the patient. Second, the technique involves a systematic attempt to release the physical tension which is found in chronically contracted and spastic muscles. Third, the relationship between therapist and patient has an added dimension to that found in

psychoanalysis. Since the work is done on a physical level in addition to the analysis on a verbal level, the resulting activity involves the analyst more deeply than do the conventional techniques.

What about transference and counter-transference in such a situation? They are the bridge across which ideas and feelings flow between two individuals. In bioenergetic therapy, the physical contact brings both transference and counter-transference more sharply into focus. This facilitates the affective side of the analytic work. It demands, however, a greater ability on the part of the analyst to handle the resulting emotional tensions. If this ability is lacking, the analyst has not completed his own preparation for the task. Only with humility and candor dare one come face to face with the great wells of feeling which lie at the core of human beings.

This volume makes no pretense to be a complete presentation of the theories and techniques of bioenergetic analysis and therapy. The field is as vast as the subject of life itself. As an introduction to the subject, it should bridge the gap between psychoanalysis and the concept of a physical approach to emotional disorders. Further studies are in progress on both the theoretical and practical aspects of this work.

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