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ABSTRACT

The human being is an organism consisting of body-feelings-mind. Any displacement of this integration of self causes a blocking of personality often expressing itself in neurotic behavior. The one obvious factor presenting itself in the counselor's office is neurotic behavior. The therapeutic fields of bioenergetics and gestalt have contributed to helping human beings by bringing to awareness these blockings. Specifically, the trauma of growth leaves its mark in the blocked musculature of the body. This blocking of energetic movement inhibits us from self-actualizing. To be of value to the total person, these factors must be dealt with. The counselor who is able to recognize energetically deprived people can render service to such people in much more depth. The author discusses a workshop which experientially investigates energy systems within the gestalt context. Participants have a chance to understand theory as well as release their blocked energy in a low-risk situation.
 (Author)

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THE ENERGETIC STARVATION OF
SCHOOL CHILDREN

by

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I am observing life in the neonatal intensive care unit of Columbia Presbyterian Hospital in New York City and I am holding a tiny one-and-a-half pound infant, born prematurely. I cradle this wee figure of a human being, trying to put out some of my own adult energy, trying to make contact. I feel my face grow hot and my hands holding the blanket grow hot. Something happens to my being and I feel my chest "melt" with a burning sensation and my eyes moisten. My breathing becomes deep and somehow I feel connected to this child. The infant begins to move, its lips curled into a gnome-like smile. The little hands and arms move almost frantically. The fists open and close and the whole body makes a writhing motion within the cave of the blanket. I hear a tiny sound, not a cry, something like the sound of a sigh just before sleep. Some kind of symbiotic unity takes place. Even though the baby is almost weightless, I feel his strong presence in my energy space. Suddenly, we are charged with energy, the two of us. He drifts off into a sweet sleep and I begin to look about the unit. My eyes are seeing with crystal clarity, my breathing slow and deep, my self-awareness keen and confident. I feel at one with everybody in the unit, the nurses, the residents, the aides, and the infants. The interchange with

that tiny baby has put me in touch with the reality of my relationship to myself and my environment. The instance has been a pure energy exchange. It has been a learning experience for me and, I suspect for him also.

Now I know that a baby cannot communicate with my mental or even emotional structures. He, in fact, has no mental or emotional structures the way I have. Indeed, in the "bible" of neonatal textbooks, it states that from birth to 3 or 4 months, the infant has "no concept of the self and therefore no identity"...⁽¹⁾ I also know that a human being is composed of an organism that at maturity functions simultaneously on the three levels of body, feelings (emotions) and mind. Whereas I am interacting with this tiny infant with, perhaps, an integration of my body, feelings, and mind - call it my organism - he, in turn, can only engage me on the body level. The other two just haven't developed yet. All of us, in this early stage of development, engaged in human communication solely on the body level. This kind of communicative learning was nourishing enough to get us moving through our infancy and into early childhood. The body had and has a wisdom, enough wisdom to keep us alive in that so-helpless period of our lives. The body responds to love, hate, and pain. Hypnosis,

altered states of consciousness and gestalt techniques have enabled adults to re-experience the time before the development of mental and emotional faculties - the time of the body.

The child will grow and develop a relationship with his environment aided by nourishment in the form of food and feeling. These are necessary substances for all children, but they vary in their amounts and intensities according to the unique human being. Reich and Lowen have pointed out and defined the stages of human development in terms of their traumatic factors. They have indicated that when the organism is threatened, most importantly the ego, it will react by holding its growth in check - growth will be "arrested". The arresting of growth equals the arresting of the energetic flow that makes up the physical-emotional-mental being. The arresting of energetic flow in the organism is seen physically as the developing of musculature that serves to inhibit or block the body's normal movement process. Movement can be thought of as the act of growing, the act of expanding, the act of searching. Some clarification is needed about the word searching.

Searching, in the energetic sense, does not necessarily mean actively seeking out something. Rather, it means allowing the organism to experience its own state, its own self. Water, if unobstructed in a stream, will by the nature of its flow, search out spaces around rocks and earth to form little pools and streamlets. It, therefore, continuously re-experiences its own state. If held behind a dam, it may form a massive, stagnant pool. If a human state is one in which joy is the priority factor of life at the given moment, so be it. If the state is one in which authentic loneliness is to be felt, so be it. It is with the experiencing of its authentic self (state), that the organism finds out it is truly alive. And that's all that is really necessary - to find out that I am truly alive. When I am aware of this, I am at that moment invincible. I had an experience recently which illustrates this statement. I was completing a therapy session in which I became aware of a feeling of intense love for the therapist. Along with the feeling of intense love came the feeling of intense power, physical power. I felt my strength. I felt really invincible. When I left the office and walked the length of 57th Street in New York City, I became aware of noticing that the cars and buses seemed smaller, that I seemed bigger. I was not floating in ecstasy, but walking with a

sense of firmness which made me feel authentically strong (see Lowen's remarks on "highs" in Bioenergetics)². I was really strong. It was no illusion. I saw with piercing sharpness. I was acutely aware of my environment. It was o.k. - where I was - I was grounded or centered or whatever. The semantic didn't mean anything. I was there. For some hours afterwards, I felt the value of me and of my surroundings. I learned from me and I learned from my surroundings. I and my surroundings were of value to me. I trusted me and I trusted my surroundings. We learned from each other. It was as it should be. The universe was as it should be. I was the baby in the ICU at Columbia-Presbyterian and I was involved in a kind of natural search which I could now translate as learning from my environment. What I was in the process of learning was that my trusting the therapist had brought about my feeling of being grounded. That sense of "being" was so real to me that it felt like invincibility. As the baby in the ICU trusted in me, so I trusted in the therapist. I had touched the beginnings of my history, and in so doing integrated my organism. It was necessary and right that I learn. I had a right to learn. And learning was growing. And growing was being and expanding and experiencing pleasure.

As I read and think about and work with Lowen's five characterological stages of development, my awareness is that they involve shared struggle. The oral child, for example, shares the pain of the parent who must abandon him, as well as his own pain. What inner struggles and fears go on in the parent who, in order to cope with a child's emerging sense of self, chooses to suppress that child - we can guess at or diagnose after careful study of the problem. The point is that the child surely senses the parent's struggles. When faced with the parent's acting out, he experiences his own humiliation and fear and also the emotional turmoil of the parent. If the quintessence of my sense of pleasure concerns a sharing factor, whether it be intra-sharing or sharing with my environment (example: the orgasm), then my development characterologically involves a relationship with this phenomenon. In order for me to interact with my environment, whether it be my physical environment or the environment which is my parents, I must first react to the energy coming from it. If the energy is threatening or traumatic, I will act to protect myself. Part of the reason that environmental negativity is traumatic to me is because I experience the pain behind that negativity. I, loving my parents, share the

hurt and misery that causes them to seek to control me, to crush my person, to abandon me, etc...

My tendencies to displace energy upwards into the ego function in order to control my environment has its roots in the shared feelings of seduction, learned from a seductive parent. I acquire the technique of being able to give love, but not deeply or fully, of being able to "be there" for someone but to be there carefully so as not to expose myself to hurt or a "broken heart". I had a good teacher for both these characterological states in my mother. Even my lack of contact, my isolation, my fragmentary fears are pickups of energy coming towards me from the hostile environment of my past. I share that hostility and that fear.

I would suggest that most western people experience a process of conditioning which, cutting across character types, produces a state I will term energetic starvation. It is one in which the energy is held down, and it is not a shared state. It is a state imposed on children with a unique directness; we call it education. A rather graphic way of visualizing this state is to remember the comic strips (cartoons, funny paper, etc.). Whenever someone was hit over the head,

there appeared a word over the person denoting the noise of the hitting. The word was often "thunk!" The imposed process of our educational structure upon children is the process of thunking rather than thinking. Thunking is dullness of thinking. Thunking is hammering down the organism so as to suppress integrated growth. By integrated growth I mean the physical, mental, and emotional learning necessary for an organism to find its way naturally into maturity. Ideally, education provides a pathway for maturing energy to flow into adulthood. In reality, there is no pathway. As Haney and Zimbardo point out, "The real tragedies of our school system are not the troublemakers or even the dropouts. They are the endless procession of faceless students who go through the system quietly and unquestioningly, unobtrusive and unnoticed. They have somehow learned to inhibit individual expression of any form, whether achievement or rebellion. They have accustomed themselves to passive non-identity and nonparticipation." (3)

I am six years old. I have developed with a minimum of neurotic tendencies over my first six years. I have been told that I am going to go to school like the other boys and girls in my neighborhood. Perhaps I am excited about this not only because of the other boys and girls in my neighborhood, but

because my brothers and sisters go to school. They talk about their teachers. I build a fantasy about their teachers as well as about the other children. I want to go to school too. But I am also a bit scared. It is unknown. I can only imagine it. The dark is also unknown. The other side of town is also unknown. Jumping from the top of the fence is scary because it is also unknown. I will not cry for my mother on the first day of school. I am excited and open to my new experience of growing. Well, really I am open to growing, but I'm also a wee bit nervous. After all, this is a brand new structure for me. I'm away from home for the first time. Everything will be big and new and confusing. I hope they will remember me. I'm here and I'm willing to give this new thing a try, but don't forget me please. I'm a person! Don't forget me!

Notwithstanding the standout gains made by inovators in education like George Brown's "Confluent Education" concepts and George Leonard's tantalizing Education and Ecstasy,⁽⁴⁾ my six year old self is in for tough sledding. The next few years will find my six year old energy carefully and systematically held down by the institution of the thinking process. I will become part of a group called a class. This is different than the kind of group who explores life and learning, the kind of

group exploration developing slowly in places like Summerhill, Detroit, and other centers of learning often labelled "alternative". I will learn to stand in line to eat, to play, to go to the library, to eliminate my waste. I will learn to lie down and rest when ordered. I will learn to play games which instruct me how to function as part of a team. I will become team-oriented. I will be part of the whole. If I choose not to become part of the whole, I will be like a "bad cell". I will be repaired by being punished. There are so many ways to be punished. My teacher will not like me. He or she will give me disapproving looks or words. I will feel no warmth from him. He won't touch me to make me feel secure. I will begin to feel different than everybody else. Maybe he will make me stay after school, or write letters home to my mother. He might make me write sentences like "I will learn to sit in my seat" many many times. Eventually, I will learn to do things the way they want me to. By the time I am in the 5th grade, I will have learned to do things the "correct" way.

Have you ever noticed young children in roughly the 5th grade? The boys have a tendency to sit almost horizontally. This grade often seems to be a plateau stage where the noise and turmoil of the lower grades seem to suddenly abate. The girls sit

quietly with both feet on the floor, knees together, hands folded, like "little ladies". So picture the children: boys horizontal and girls like "little ladies". The holding down of the natural process of energetic growth has resulted in "thunked" children, thunked of life and the sense of excitement that growing and learning initiates. In fact, a far more serious phenomenon has taken place. A state has grown to exist whereby energy and its flow face a situation of starvation, brought about by the dynamics of the educational structure. The situation has not been a shared experience, but something imposed from above - from "the powers that be". The child has been deprived of awareness. He has not shared in the process. He has not even been able to look up and experience the thunking. He has both literally and metaphorically been energetically starved and his organism has temporarily stopped trying, stopped growing. He has given up.

Fortunately, this state of energetic starvation is only temporary. Whereas it is possible, in cases where thunking is most extreme, to be so held down that further growth becomes possible only with the help of competent and understanding therapy, most children merely pause in preparation for the "roman candle" of a new and powerful energy surge. They are,

of course, unaware of this coming phenomenon called puberty.

I am in the 6th grade. I am aware of changes going on in my body. I check my upper lip in the mirror for traces of hair. I'm sure I have the beginnings of a mustache. This excites me. There is no doubt that I am getting hair all around my penis. I am a man. I am tough. I think about the girls in school. They are getting breasts. This excites me. Suddenly we are all becoming men and women. It feels good to touch myself and to play with my penis. I want girls to play with it. I want to play with them. My mother's breasts excite me. I wonder what my father's penis looks like? My friends and I show each other our genitals. An older boy in the neighborhood shows us how to masturbate. It is tremendously exciting. I do it every chance I get. Sometimes, when I am sitting in class, I want to masturbate. My penis gets hard. I look at the girls and imagine them naked. I imagine my female teachers naked. I imagine feeling their breasts. I feel restless. I am bored. I want to get out of that class. I want to kiss the girl next to me. Sometimes we hold hands and I get an erection in class. The teacher stops us from holding hands in class. She is a bitch. I hate her. She humiliates me. I will rip the pages of a book. I will write sexual things on the walls of the toilet.

I will fight other boys. I will speak in a loud voice. I am a man.

I used to think that girls had babies if they kissed boys too much. Now I am menstruating. I know that babies are made by sexual intercourse. I don't want to get a baby. Pregnant women both scare and attract me. I love to play with and take care of babies. I am a good babysitter. I am developing breasts and my body is changing. I feel a real sense of my vagina as it moves to a new position in my body. Boys are animals but they excite me. I feel much closer to my girlfriends than I ever did before. We laugh and giggle alot about boys. My teachers are awful, especially the old ones. Some of the young ones are not ugly. One man is beautiful. I can have day dreams about him. I dream of having sexual intercourse with him. I don't dream of exactly how it happens, but I get his baby and marry him. He pays a lot of attention to one of my woman teachers. He's probably having sexual intercourse with her. That excites me. I want to look at the boys in my class a lot, but I am afraid to. They scare me. They excite me. I will be good in school. I will let the boys show off and get in trouble. They are so stupid. I wish some of them would grow up and be like my favorite movie star. He is so suave.

Menstruating scares me. Growing up scares me. There is no one to talk to in school. The way to get along is to behave. I will sit up in class and behave. I will get along by pleasing everybody. I will not be like that other girl who talks back to the teacher and kisses boys at lunch time. She is a bad girl. I'll bet she has sexual intercourse. She has big breasts. I'm afraid of her. I'll be good and not cause any trouble. Then everyone will like me.

The 6th grade youngster has received a "battery recharge" from nature. The age of puberty brings about a new sense of energetic flow. The genitals are alive and seek their fulfillment. The resulting behavior runs contrary to educational structure and policy. These manifestations of energy and their accompanying behavior are met with renewed thinking. The aggressive flow of sexual energy is held down with a new vigor. Sports are not enough. Junior High School has long had the reputation of being a teacher-pupil wasteland. The 7th and 8th grades and sometimes into the 9th grade are periods of readjustment in which much aggressive behavior is tried. The result is always the same. With the systematic holding down of the organism's growth and movement energetically, another starvation process sets in. By the time the pupil is in his 12th and final year

of public education, he is again in a horizontal position in his seat. The female student is sitting with her legs crossed - not merely at the knees, but also with her foot tucked around the opposite leg - she has been "double-crossed!" And, in effect, she has been double-crossed by an educational system closely resembling, as Haney and Zimbardo point out, a prison. "Our nation's schools have turned into prisons, with guards posing as teachers, and students learning how to be docile prisoners."⁽⁵⁾

What of those who will not be thunked? They become the institution's behavior problems. They become society's delinquents. The "solitary confinement" of education is to ostracize the student. He becomes a dead issue. In the early school years, such a child might have been given a dosage of medication designed to "calm".him. This horrendous drugging of children whose energy does not flow in conformity with educational policy gives way to eventual labelling of adolescents as college-bound, general, vocational, dropout (depending upon the area of the country, the labels are different). The delinquent is labelled such and may wind up in the army if he's lucky or in cosmetology (hairdressing) if she's lucky. In any case, the student is made aware of his or her being

different and often develops considerable animosity towards those who have been thunked into fitting into the "system". It ought to be significant to educators that usually the one sympathetic teacher both sexes of nonthunkees can relate to is the physical education instructor. When one thinks of such students as having a surplus of energy with no nourishing direction for it, it seems natural for them to seek those professionals who, in their own way, are concerned with providing physical directions for such energy.

We have decided to educate the rational rather than the whole person. It seems logical (I'm trapped with that word) to do this, since the one stable way man has to communicate with each other is by using the rational. It is the rational which provides our systems of law, government, and most human behavior. If one should give emphasis to his irrational side, he becomes a target for exclusion. Some are excluded from jobs for being irrational, some are imprisoned for being irrational. We fear the irrational and irrational behavior. Yet, allowing oneself to be aware of the flow of one's irrational parts provides the necessary balance which makes up the mature self. I would maintain that the rational man, the pure rhetorician, the debator is not the mature person, but one who lives a

puppet's life glued together by general semantics. This remark is not negatively directed at the field of semantics, but is made to point out the vital and missing ingredients of a mature self - namely the energy flow which brings a human being into touch with his integrated (body-feelings-mind) person.

So now I am sitting in a university classroom - one of the "lucky" ones. I can now be exposed to professors who will inform me about history, mathematics, philosophy, literature. I might learn how to analyse the marketing trends of business and how to figure accounts. I may learn how to fix up bodies which have become diseased or broken, how to prosecute and defend those coming into contact with my legal system of government. There is much more. I ought to be excited about being on the threshold of experiencing what life and the wisdom of the ages has to offer me, but I'm not. I hate being here. I hate these pompous asses who stand before me and dictate to me as I wear out my writing hand taking notes. I hate being told to study a subject for months and months and perhaps years, only to take a series of examinations at the end of all that time to determine whether I have been able to master and regurgitate the data in order to lay claim to a degree that calls me educated. I really hate my teachers. They are so much more

arrogant than in the lower grades. But, I have learned to give them what they want. I will study and give them back the data. I will sit in class. I am a class member.

But, my last act of defiance will be to openly show what the results of all the thinking has done to me. I am horizontal. I will not sit up. The concept of sitting straight is to be "straight". To be straight is to be dull, square, lame, clean, uncool, and all the rest of the words which describe Ortega's masses.⁽⁶⁾ I won't get up. I'll never get up again. I won't stand on my feet or take a stand. I'll work for you and I'll hate you, but you'll never see my hate. I'll bury my true feelings (which is also to stop thinking) so don't try to get me to feel. If you try, I will fight you as hard as I can. I will marry and procreate and work and retire and die. You've won and I hate you. I'll allow myself this feeling and I'll keep it to myself. And although you have won, it is my hate that makes me feel alive. In later years, I'll release this feeling in many ways. I'll drink. I'll strike for more wages (and whatever else I can). If I make it to the "professional" level, I'll waste, I'll hoard, I'll seek kinds of play which are the opposite to what I was taught by school, parents, and religion. And I guarantee I'll continue to hate what was

done to me by education. And worst of all, I'll hate myself for giving up and giving education what it wanted in order to gain its rewards. The rewards are that I belong. I belong to a society of energy starved, thunked humans who, no matter what political party or vocational hierarchy directs them, will do as they are told. It is too painful for me to be aware of all this at the core level, so I will cut off all feeling which is deep and authentic. I will act out in many different ways. I will withdraw under emotional stress. I will use spite instead of anger. I will use sex as a derivative of fear and anger. I will develop all kinds of ailments which are emotionally derived. In short, I will demonstrate to those arrogant enough to study me and label me within the context of behavioral science that in addition to holding energy in many directions as a result of early trauma, I now accept my thunking. You see, it's easier to belong to those millions of humans whose energy has been held down to the point of starvation. I feel this sense of comfort when I ride the subway (tube, metro) to work each day and experience the communality of my own dullness, or listen to radio stations which all sound the same as I drive in long lines of stalled traffic each morning and evening. My comfort is in my defeat (because I am familiar with defeat) as I live on the edge of failure while still attending to milking

the cows twice each day, seven days per week, 52 weeks per year - or - give in to the strip miners and sell my grazing lands and make money experiencing awful guilt while doing it.

And I who stand before those energetically starved students and surrender to the status quo who will not allow irrational learning, who will not allow experimentation with energy to release what is blocked and integrate that nourishment into the learning process, I too am a culprit. Because I have undergone the process of thunking and resisted, saying "No I won't!" So in addition to feeling the pseudo-satisfaction that resistance brings, I feel the helplessness that my sense of valuelessness to my students and clients too often brings to my awareness. Yet, along with this feeling exists also the sense of my all rightness, because sometimes I am of value. I know it, but more importantly, I feel it in my body's flow. It is this movement of my organism which keeps me, down through the years, curious, angry, frightened, sexual, and loving. Learning to allow these feelings, I will not starve.

So the state of energy starvation, produced by the holding down of the organism's natural maturation process - which constitutes learning and growing via energetic means -

ultimately leads to a life environment in which self-actualization becomes an impossibility because the sense of self is so dim. This dim quality is the result of thinking - the year by year, consistent suppression of the organism's excitement, the throttling of the mind's curiosity, and the stifling of the irrational self.

I believe that teacher training must involve thorough theoretical and experiential education in gestalt and the kind of energetic discoveries which trace Reich's contributions along with the practical and valuable characterology of Lowen. Others like Pierrakos, Keleman, Hilton, Baker are experimenting and publishing their findings. They have much to contribute to a whole new environment of learning. For meaningful change to take place, there must be a revolution of training so that those who teach the university and pre-university student can help facilitate an integration of rational with irrational, of body with feelings with mind = an organism grounded in reality. As Lowen puts it within the therapeutic structure, a person ".....has the right to be in the world, needing but also independent, free but also loving and committed."⁽⁷⁾ A person has the right to learn.

In recent experiments with classes in small group communication and interpersonal communication, I introduced simple bioenergetic exercises as I felt they contributed to the flow of the energetic dynamics of each class. I found two basic factors to emerge. The first was that students felt a new and exciting sense of their being alive both intrapersonally and as sharing members of a learning group. They found a common experience as blocked energy was released. This was not only evidenced by their feedback, but the way they walked, the sound of their voices, and the glow of their energy reflected in their complexions. The other factor was that I was able to diagnose obvious character disorders and suggest counselling for such students (it should be noted that in my particular situation the counselling or psychology departments had the responsibility to suggest therapy, and some working relationship with such departments is necessary for success in helping those students who are borderline or manifest strong holding traits). My experiments are certainly in their infancy. I believe there is a contribution to be made by introducing responsible energy dynamics into a humanistic curriculum. It is my hope that this paper has delineated one area of research seeking to offer a realistic learning environment for the 12 to 16 years of structured public education.

NOTES

- 1
Richard Behrman, Editor, Neonatology: Diseases of the Fetus and Infant (St. Louis: C.D. Mosby Company, 1973), p.p. 65-66
- 2
Alexander Lowen, Bioenergetics (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, Inc., 1975), p. 186
- 3
Craig Haney and Philip G. Zimbardo, "It's Tough to Tell a High School from a Prison," Psychology Today, Volume 9, No. 1 (June, 1975), p.p. 26-30 and p. 106
- 4
See George Brown's The Live Classroom and Confluent Education published by The Viking Press and George Leonard's Education and Ecstasy published by Delta.
- 5
See Haney and Zimbardo's article above.
- 6
See Ortega y Gasset's The Revolt of the Masses published by Norton.
- 7
Alexander Lowen "A Hierarchy in Characterology," Energy and Character, Volume 5, No. 3 (September, 1974), p. 6