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The Body Never Lies

In Memory of Alexander Lowen

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Sometimes the conversations of humanistic psychologists seem overly intellectualized, focusing on esoteric issues (e.g., debating so-called paradigm differences between mainstream positivistic and humanistic psychologies), relying on obtuse language (e.g., employing highly nuanced terminology from existential/phenomenological philosophers unknown to all but a few initiates), and even delving into radically relativistic constructivism implying that all perspectives are without solidity and essentially rest on a cascade of words whose meaning are only arbitrary. However, Alexander (Al) Lowen (1910-2008) gave little credence to such approaches. He used words sparingly and always directly, ensuring that they were grounded in direct body experience and not just abstractions, as he was convinced that overintellectualization distances us from what he unwaveringly saw as constituting the core of life, our embodied existence.

Wilhelm Reich (see biography by Sharaf, 1994) was Al's mentor and therapist, as he was to another well-known humanistic therapist who emphasized body-oriented approaches, Frederick (Fritz) Perls (see his autobiography, *In and Out of the Garbage Pail*, 1969), founder of gestalt therapy. Reich was a controversial protégé of Freud, who pioneered psychoanalytically based somatic approaches to therapy. Al held two law degrees at the time he met Reich, but he became deeply changed by his own personal therapy with Reich, deciding to leave law to become a psychiatrist by completing a medical degree, which he did in 1954. Then Al, along with his colleague, psychiatrist John Pierrakos, built on Reich's (1980) contributions by developing a unique blend of mind-body therapy integrating psychological with somatic interventions they called bioenergetic analysis, which later began to simply be called bioenergetic therapy or, shortened further, bioenergetics.

During the early years of the humanistic psychology movement, Al was among its most influential pioneers. He presented frequent bioenergetic

workshops in prominent venues, such as Esalen Institute, getting equal billing alongside the other most influential leaders of the humanistic movement, such as Fritz Perls and Carl Rogers. As an incredibly talented therapist, he was able to reach deeply into people in a way that few else could, quickly bringing workshop participants to deeply-felt realizations that left little doubt in both participants and observers that something powerful was happening when he worked with people. Many flocked to his workshops, and he influenced a large number of therapists through training programs he created at the International Institute of Bioenergetic Analysis, which continues to certify bioenergetic therapists. Likewise, many psychotherapists who elected not to become bioenergetic therapists nevertheless came to see AI as a therapist's therapist; although they might only take most of their own patients so deep in the therapeutic process, they would look at bioenergetics as an approach for their own deepest growth and, perhaps, use bioenergetic techniques with a select few of their patients. AI's work also had wide influence on the burgeoning field of "somatic psychotherapy" (also known as psychosomatic and body-oriented psychotherapy; Hanna, 1986). Somatic approaches treat the person both psychologically and through a heterogeneous assortment of body modalities, including manipulation of bones/joints, soft tissues, and even so-called subtle energies, and often draw from the Reichian tradition, including AI's work.

AI also left a rich legacy of writings, including many books and monographs. His major book written for a professional audience, *Language of the Body: Physical Dynamics of Character Structure* (Lowen, 1958/2006) outlined his basic theoretical stance. In a later book, *Bioenergetics: The Revolutionary Therapy that Uses the Language of the Body to Heal the Problems of the Mind* (Lowen, 1977), AI wrote in a more popularly accessible way on his approach to therapy. He described bioenergetics as a way to diagnose and therapeutically intervene with people through understanding humans as energy systems from both psychological and somatic perspectives. Diagnoses focused on traditional psychoanalytic concepts, understood through somatic perspectives (e.g., defense mechanisms seen as both a mental maneuvering and a physical process of blocking awareness), and working actively with clients' bodies were the hallmarks of his approach to therapy. AI often lamented that "talk" psychotherapy resulted only in superficial changes unless there were also accompanying somatic changes. He also lamented that solely somatic interventions, such as massage, lacked the psychological integration needed for creating lasting changes. In this way, he felt bioenergetics combined both somatic and

psychological approaches more effectively than either alone for resolving problems and enhancing pleasure.

Al's keen observations of bodily structures (e.g., posture) and functions (e.g., movement) were amazing. He could look at a person and almost unerringly read key aspects of their life history from their body alone, no words needed. These insights stemmed from Reich's (1980) early work with chronic muscular tension (i.e., armoring) as the first line of defense against threatening feelings. As emotion (i.e., e-"motion") etymologically references movement and, because muscles are the basis of movement, armoring inhibits both emotional feelings and expression (e.g., muscular tensions in the jaw can block both the capacity to feel and express anger); in this way, armoring operates similarly to psychological defense mechanisms, but at a somatic level. Al frequently insisted that, although people can say what they will—such as denying painful feelings, the body never lies.

From these astute observations, Al's therapy focused on releasing both psychological and physical tensions, restoring clients' capacity to feel and express, that is, their aliveness. Although Al discussed body and mind as if separate, he always assumed they were functionally equivalent, acknowledging the dualistic limitation of words and always referencing experiences back toward the lived body. His basic conceptualization was that experience (e.g., increasing fear) affects somatic expression (e.g., increasing panic breathing), whereas somatic expression (e.g., increasing panic breathing) in turn affects experience (e.g., increasing fear) in an endless circle of reciprocity. Consequently, bioenergetics employs both psychological interventions focusing on increasing the depth of experience, including placing experience into a meaningful context using psychoanalytic conceptions and somatic interventions focusing on increasing the capacity for movement and energy availability. To illustrate, a person experiencing anhedonia might be asked to express negative feelings either verbally or through physical action, such as hitting a pillow. This type of expression will often result in an increased felt-sense of energy that enables regaining contact with emotional experience previously blocked by armoring and that only can be reexperienced after release of tensions. In this regard, bioenergetics can be applied to many psychological and even physical (e.g., low back pains without known organic cause) conditions—and it can be particularly applicable for so-called treatment-resistant "negative symptoms," such as anhedonia, which are increasingly common in modern culture.

Until near the end of Al's life, he continued to do therapy with clients and provide workshops. He also continued to diligently work on himself using bioenergetic techniques, engaging in daily kicking and hitting to keep

his body vibrant well into his 90s. He was preceded in death by his loving wife, Leslie Lowen, who also was a therapist. He is survived by Frederic Lowen, his son, and Sonya Lowen, his granddaughter. Al's recent autobiography, *Honoring the Body* (Lowen, 2004), provides a deeper glimpse into the life of this remarkable man.

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