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Chapter 15

Back to the Future: A Case Study

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While bringing an embodied form of existential-humanistic psychology to China is in some ways new, embodiment is also part of the very roots of existential-humanistic psychology. In this section, I will describe how the original International Conference on Existential Psychology in China in 2010 included an inquiry into embodiment (Serlin, 2010). There was surprising interest in using dance therapy and the arts to work with groups, particularly groups of counselors or therapists in training. We developed courses like Group Process in Dance Therapy: Existential/Depth Approach. We also worked with existential themes like freedom and fate, using Chinese and Western myths. Dance and the use of the arts fit well, I think, with the Chinese appreciation of culture as a psychological foundation. Through reclaiming the awareness of their bodies, the students learned to express and affirm themselves.

These classes led to a two-year training program in Embodiment at the China Institute of Psychology and related trainings in embodied humanistic psychology in China. In some ways, perhaps China's ancient traditions of martial arts and traditional medicine are a bridge to a ready understanding of embodiment and holistic therapies. In addition, the newness of psychotherapy as a profession in China might have created openness to innovation that is similar to the experimentation with psychology in the United States in the 1970s. In either case, the enthusiastic embrace and growth of embodied existential-humanistic psychology in China has been surprising, refreshing, and full of promise.

I am concerned with the loss of focus on embodiment in existential-humanistic psychotherapy because my initial experience of it in 1966 was as a very vibrant, creative, opening experience. It contained areas of experiential learning with an experimental wing of the psychology department. We designed a course on Humanistic Psychology at the University of Michigan in 1966 and went to the First Conference on the Association for Humanistic Psychology (AHP) in Washington, DC. We were also doing yoga in the arboretum, experimenting with encounter groups, and doing massage practices. Esalen Institute sponsored teachers like Michael Murphy and George Leonard, who developed a method of embodied practice. Wilhelm Reich and Alexander Lowen tried to free human potential through bioenergetics, while Thomas Hanna and Eleanor Criswell (the

first president and founder of Saybrook University) developed and named the field called somatics. Trainings were offered in techniques such as the Alexander technique, the Rubenfeld method, Feldenkrais, Sensory Awareness, and dance (Serlin & Criswell, 2015). I apprenticed with Anna Halprin when she was using dance to stage and work through race riots in Los Angeles (Serlin, 1998). These pioneers, pushing through boundaries of physical constriction, helped free the human potential movement of humanistic psychology.

Besides the embodied pioneers in humanistic psychology, the early women pioneers are also not taught enough to students. For example, Laura Perls wrote the first book on Gestalt psychotherapy with her husband Fritz, and their colleague, Paul Goodman; however, most psychology textbooks teach only about Fritz Perl's rather aggressive form of Gestalt therapy. Laura Perls, in contrast, was an artist (pianist), student of Martin Buber, and taught a much more meditative and subtle process. Leaving these teachings out of the training of new students is theoretically unbalanced and needs to be brought back to balance (Serlin, 1992; Serlin & Shane, 1999).

Laura embodied a different form of Gestalt and way of knowing than Fritz. Some of this difference is part of what has been described as *women's ways of knowing* (Serlin, 1995; Serlin & Criswell, 2001). Some call this kind of perception more horizontal and relational than vertical and authoritative. It might be a form of incarnate perception (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012) and certainly should be included in the training of humanistic psychologists.

Other women were also highly important in the development of existential-humanistic psychotherapy. I first read Sartre as a French literature student, but then found my role model in Simone de Beauvoir (2009), whose work has been called: "the single most influential work ever to come out of the existentialist movement" (Bakewell, 2016, p. 210). And since so many of the women I met in China were struggling with what it meant to be a woman, Simone de Beauvoir spoke to them as well.

Introducing S

This case took place as part of a group training in existential-humanistic psychotherapy. The group had been together for about two years under strong clinical leadership, so they knew and trusted one another. The format was that some members of the group would present cases for me to use as a demonstration. Some of these members presented themselves as the case.

S volunteered to present herself as a case.⁵ I first noticed her as a member of a training group I did in China in the springtime of 2017. S was tall and strong-looking, with an energetic grin and a playful spirit. Her English was quite good and

⁵ S gave permission for her story to be used in this chapter. Certain details, like her age and name, were changed to hide her identity.

she was obviously intelligent. Her movements were quick and agile, sensitively attuned to people around her.

When S indicated a desire to work on herself, I was saddened and surprised to hear about her background. Her mother and father married young, as did many of their generation. The mother realized it had been a mistake soon after the marriage but by then was pregnant. Her mother tried to abort several times but failed.

Several years later, her parents divorced and S was raised by her mother in another city. S had to re-create herself at a young age and tried to make new friends. Instead, she was bullied at school and felt very insecure. She understood that her mother never really wanted to be a mother, and S often had to be the parent. Her mother was critical and also absent. S felt abandoned by both parents. She has had minimal contact with her father and not seen him for many years.

As S told this story, she began to weep, and curled up on my lap. She cried for several minutes, showing pleasure in surrendering to a feeling of being cared for. I expected, if anything, we would do some work with this Inner Child. It can be tempting to work with the Wounded Child instead of noticing what is actually happening in the moment, which is the primary focus in existential-humanistic psychotherapy.

When S described the endless fights in the household when growing up, she said that after a while she developed a new attitude. As she described her new attitude, her eyes twinkled. To me she looked somewhat amused. I asked her if she found something amusing from those early years, sometimes like a bad television sitcom (i.e., situation comedy T.V. show). She said yes and then noted that she had more distance from it now. What we found was her sense of the absurdity of life, a central concept of existential-humanistic therapy. We talked about *Waiting for Godot*, a landmark French existential play.

S's response to the absurdity of life was to be playful. After coming out of her wounded inner self, she was ready to re-engage in the world. I asked her to go around the circle inventing one playful gesture with each person as she went. She did this, producing some hilarious and sensitive moments. She was delighted to feel witnessed in a caring environment. At this point, she was developing her leadership abilities in the group and finding her own voice. Finding one's authentic self and authentic voice is a key theme of existential-humanistic psychotherapy. By embodying the various voices within herself, S was able to find a new integration and power to re-create herself.

Distinguishing Existential-Humanistic Psychology from Positive Psychology

First, the existential-humanistic approach supports the full range of human experiences, including the dark and tragic side of life (Resnick, Warmoth, & Serlin, 2001). It is an approach to life, not a set of techniques. From an existential-humanistic perspective, S needed to let herself experience the regression be

witnessed, and, only if it was authentic and in her own time, discover her resilience and own her strength.

Therapeutic Issues

An existential-humanistic approach would likely frame the issues in existential terms. In this case, those issues might be core existential questions of "Who am I?" (identity), low self-esteem, isolation and alienation, and rootlessness: "Where do I come from?" "What kind of woman am I?"

Therapeutic Approach

KinAesthetic Imagining is an embodied form of imagination (Serlin, 1998, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c). Through the kinesthetic intelligence of the body, emotions are conveyed through gesture and use of energy. By creating a safe container with my body, I was able to help S sense nonverbally that S could let go and regress. After shrinking into a ball and feeling held, S began to stretch herself out. She then embodied the playful child part of herself, grounding herself on the floor and in supportive relationship with others in the group. She became powerful.

KinAesthetic Imagining also embodies some Gestalt ways of working, such as doing one-to-one work in the context of the circle. Sometimes other members of the circle might find themselves pulled into a role play, but this will only happen in the context of an authentic group. I knew that S felt comfortable already with the group and that an intense emotional experience could be supported. I believe that a group leader must regulate the emotional temperature of the group and know to what extent witnessing an emotional experience is safe for the rest of the group (see Perls, 1992).

KinAesthetic Imagining also works a lot with images, work found in the creative arts therapies (Serlin, 2007). We amplify images through art, voice, and movement. We learn that the body is always communicating, often indirectly through symbol. Symbols can work with different parts of the brain in a different manner than verbal speech and can access emotion more quickly. We sharpen our skills in reading nonverbal communication and take comfort in communicating purely through movement. For me, this is existential: Movement is life, the flow of life and the flow of being.

Role of Therapist

As with many other forms of existential-humanistic therapy, the role of the therapist generally is interactive and client centered. As I tuned into my strong maternal embodied feelings during the session, I remained aware that this was a very special context (i.e., training). Most therapists could not get down on the floor and hold a client, but as a dance movement therapist I can do that when appropriate to the situation. On the other hand, sometimes the physical embodied form does not have to be concrete. It can be a subtler use of energy to contain, to support, and even to confront.

My role feels like a mother giving birth, delighted in seeing a lovely child go skipping away with new confidence, new self-love, and new strength. While existential-humanistic psychology certainly does not overlook the dark side of life, it does tend, on the other hand, to support life and growth. It is a growth model, helping people have the courage to really become and express themselves.

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