

the usa body psychotherapy journal

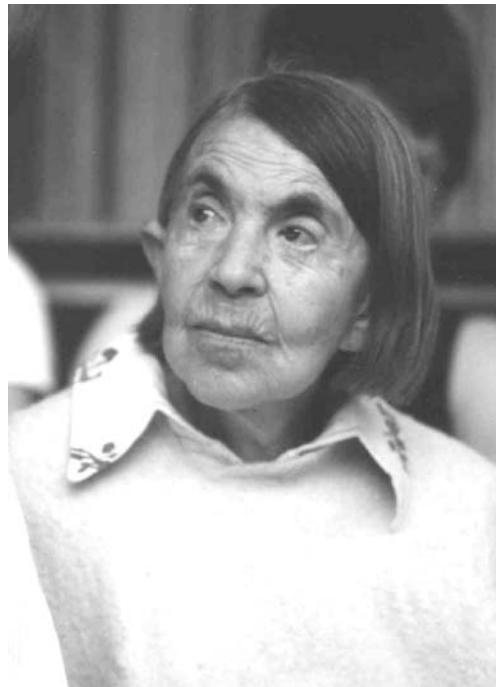


Volume 3 Number 1 2004

The Official Publication of
THE UNITED STATES ASSOCIATION FOR
BODY PSYCHOTHERAPY

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Charlotte Selver

Born April 4, 1901 – Ruhrtort, Germany
Emigrated to United States - 1938
Died August 22, 2003 – Muir Beach, California

“Becoming more and more able to be there in situations, whether easy or difficult; to be more there with our mind, with our hearts, with our sensitivities, with our strengths - this is very, very important.”

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USABP Mission Statement

The USABP believes that integration of the body and mind is essential to effective psychotherapy, and to that end, its mission is to develop and advance the art, science, and practice of body psychotherapy in a professional, ethical, and caring manner in order to promote the health and welfare of humanity.
(revised October 1999)

My Experience with Charlotte Selver and Sensory Awareness

Barbara Cabott, Psy.D., LMT

Abstract

This article reflects Dr. Barbara Cabott's experiences with Charlotte Selver, over a span of 32 years. The author expresses the benefits received through Selver's work in Sensory Awareness, both at a personal level and a professional level. Case examples are included, showing how sensing is combined with Psychotherapy to benefit clients in private practice. Dr. Cabott takes you step by step through three sessions where sensory experiments facilitated change at a body, mind, emotional level, showing the power and authenticity of sensing and body mind interventions.

Keywords

Bioenergetic Therapy – Body Psyche Integration – Assimilation – Being with Clients

In 1972, I found my way to Charlotte Selver. I was a patient of Robert Zimmerman, M.D., Alexander Lowen's partner in Bio-energetic Therapy. Dr. Zimmerman recommended that I work with Charlotte because of my interest in movement. I was a Movement Therapist in a mental hospital at the time.

Finding Charlotte was a challenge, but I succeeded, and found myself sitting on the floor of the New York School of Social Research, once a week for many weeks, studying Sensory Awareness. I immediately felt that "ecstasy" was just around the corner with this amazing practice, if not immediately present. I studied with Charlotte at least once a year, every year, from 1972 until right before her death. During that time I had many deep experiences; of inner peace, a feeling of wholeness and integration within my entire organism, that felt natural and harmonious.

The work of Sensory Awareness, was so fresh and new, so organic, so natural, it made me feel at once alive and at rest—all in balance. I learned to come to sitting or standing, bringing all of myself with me. Such a novel, yet normal concept, brought me to the freshness of the present moment. I learned to sit, according to my natural design, to walk so I stepped on the ground, feeling the support underneath me, yet not coming down so hard I crushed everything beneath my feet, to catch balls, so that each catch was alive and new.

Charlotte had so many ways of introducing us to our body and its movement, and for listening and attending to the feedback from our movement to our senses, so that we learned totally from our own inner wisdom. In this connection we became whole. The integration that came with the wholeness was healing - not only to our bodies, but also to our psyche.

In my private practice as a Psychologist, I introduce sensing to clients, so that I may share the many gifts it brings. I encourage them to bring their attention to their senses, to allow the sensory feedback to "adjust" their bodies, and also their minds and emotions.

A therapy session with Dora illustrates adjusting body and mind through sensing. Dora wanted to own more of her personal power. We began with a bioenergetic grounding exercise. During this exercise, I observed Dora's legs were unstable and shaky. We moved to a sensory experiment.* I hoped she would gain a sense of balance and stability in her legs by connecting sensing to movement.

I asked Dora to come to lying and raise one leg slightly off the floor, then slowly return her leg to the support of the floor, yielding to the weight of gravity. Working alternately with each leg, I encouraged her to attend to her shifting weight. Attention focused in this way, and to the effects of gravity, fosters connections from senses to the brain and back to movement. Movement thus integrated becomes increasingly more organic, and we adjust to the task at hand, naturally. Next, Dora repeated the movement, bringing awareness to her bones. I encouraged an attitude of curiosity and pleasure towards the movement of her bones and muscles.

As we brought the experiment to a close, Dora reflected on her experience. "This is more honoring of the body, there is pleasure in following the movement, rather than using the legs as a machine to get you somewhere. This is more about transforming than fixing." When we returned to the bioenergetic grounding exercise she definitely showed more balance and stability. There was increased awareness as a result of paying attention to her legs at a cellular level. Through very simple experiments, the body, through sensing, becomes a lived metaphor for change and transformation.

Sensing also adds a deep dimension to therapy, bringing results words alone never could. A session with Alicia, on assimilation, exemplifies this. Charlotte often talked about "assimilating" and "taking in". We worked a lot with seeing (taking in the world), rather than looking, (pushing the world out). I often encourage clients to assimilate ideas, images, relationships, in the same way a plant takes in nutrients through its cells. I encourage them to take in and let their world nourish them, rather than push the world away. I teach how senses nourish the body, and feed our brain.

Alicia was acutely fearful of other's judgments of her. She saw all people as critical and harsh. One day, I asked her to look at my face and assimilate what she saw, to take me in like the plant takes in nutrients. (She was familiar with the metaphor). Alicia looked at me and said she felt tense because she saw me as judging and critical. I suggested she move around my office and find objects that took her attention. She chose a few objects, and one by one, felt their texture and weight. I encouraged her to take the objects into her cells, step by step. This exploration with sensing brought her into the present moment, below old conditioning of fear and judgment. Soon she felt more restful inside.

We sat together and repeated the face to face experiment. I invited her to take in my face, in the same way she had assimilated the objects in the office. Immediately the quality of her gaze shifted and her face relaxed. She said, "I see a caring person who is trying to help me". This was a moment in therapy filled with true presence. A now moment where she took in the outer world without the hindrance of old filters. I was able to remain connected and join together with her experience. This moment of connection between client and therapist would be impossible to reach with words alone.

I can only imagine that new sensations rippled through Alicia's nervous system in gentle streams of energy, registering in her brain, "this face, this person is safe". Alicia, as with Dora, experienced this in her cells. It became a total experience, not an idea in her mind. Soon after this session, she stopped her anti-anxiety medication, which she had been taking for three years, and has remained medication free for a year now. The body and sensing became allies toward healing.

In being with my clients, I know to attend to sitting, to notice whether I am grounded in my feet, or holding tension in my shoulders. I remind myself, through sensing, to listen and adjust, so that I can be fully present with my clients. If the therapy process seems "stuck", we engage in some simple practices, like tapping, or working with rocks or sandbags, and sensing how they effect us. Often, new and innovative insights come from these simple experiments that "wake up" both mind and body.

A session with Max illustrates this well. He talked of wanting to be a 'good boy', of rushing around in his mind to the next thing so he could please everyone else. He said, "I can't sit still." I asked him if he could remain at rest in the session, without feeling pressured to 'get' somewhere or 'do' something. He found this uncomfortable, because images came up about his mother, and he felt very sad about how much of his life was devoted to pleasing her.

I offered an experiment with sandbags. Sandbags are small squares of silk, filled with sand, which we used in Charlotte's classes. They offer a great versatility in sensing. I handed Max a sandbag, and I took one also. Before we started the experiment, he said he wanted to throw the sandbag, but was fearful of following his wish. I encouraged him to do so, and we threw sandbags back and forth. Throwing sandbags almost always, and immediately, wakes up the mind and body, bringing the client's attention to the experience of the present moment.

On one of the catches, I asked Max to let the sandbag fall into his hand, and notice how he received its weight. He felt the weight for a few moments, then burst into sobbing. "I just needed to play with my Mom, he said, I love to play, I need to play". And he did. Attention and feeling the weight of gravity often 'melts' tenseness in the body, freeing feelings. The session ended there. Max wanted to leave the session by throwing his sandbag to me.

Max's experience opened a window to deep layers of his psyche and emotions. Throwing the sandbags brought his senses alive, raising his vitality. His interaction with me gave him a different experience than the one he had with his Mother. Our next step was to integrate his experience with words, giving it context and meaning. The ability to integrate differing parts of the nervous system, the verbal, emotional and somatic, is the strength of body mind therapies, and sensing is a powerful avenue to integration.

In my personal life, and in my Professional practice, I am deeply indebted to Charlotte for her teaching. Her experiments in sensing were presented with pristine clarity and her words describing "how it should be" if we were truly sensing were like a finely polished diamond. I have great respect and awe for how she taught this very subtle, yet powerful practice. It has made my life qualitatively different, from that moment in the New York studio in 1972, until the "Celebration of Her Life Workshop" in San Francisco in 2003.

* Charlotte introduced sensing through "experiments", as distinguished from exercises. We were experimenting, like explorers discovering the vast terrain within us that held our untapped potential.

Biography

Dr. Barbara Cabott is a licensed Psychologist and licensed Massage Therapist, in private practice in Portland, Oregon. She studied with many of the pioneers in the somatic therapy movement during the 70's and 80's. Her vision has been to bring these revolutionary practices into the mainstream of Psychology. Following that vision, she pursued a Doctorate in Psychology, with a thesis that focused on the neuroscientific underpinnings of alternative therapies. She practices Holistic Psychotherapy, a blend of body-mind integration, art and sandtray, hypnosis and EMDR.. She is currently completing a book dedicated to the synthesis of neuroscientific research and Holistic Therapy. She can be reached at bibc@imaginea.com

USA BODY PSYCHOTHERAPY JOURNAL

The Official Publication of
United States Association for Body Psychotherapy
Jacqueline A. Carleton, Ph.D., Editor (jacarletonphd@gmail.com)

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The United States Association for BODY PSYCHOTHERAPY

8639 B 16th St. Ste. 119
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Phone: 202-466-1619 Fax: 832-717-7508
E-Mail: usabp@usabp.org
Web: www.usabp.org

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The Official Publication of the USABP

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VOLUME 3, NO. 1, 2004 Printed in the USA

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Jacqueline A. Carleton, Ph.D.
Editor
USA Body Psychotherapy Journal
115 East 92nd Street #2A
New York, NY 10128
212.987.4969
jacarletonphd@gmail.com

