Getting to Know Wilhelm Reich

A Twenty-First Century Introduction to Wilhelm Reich

David Silver

“We say that the common functioning principle of the living is pulsation …
You can see it in the movements of walking, swimming,
in the movements of a fish or a bird or any animal …
A child wriggles … This pulsation is basic.”
—Wilhelm Reich

The Wilhelm Reich Museum is excited to work with the IBPJ in bringing you this inaugural presentation of a new feature called “Getting to Know Wilhelm Reich.” This issue’s introduction covers, in broad strokes, the relevance of Reich’s work to the field of body psychotherapy and somatic psychology. In future issues, we will seek to draw insights from presentations on specific topics of a historical or practical nature, which we hope practitioners and other readers of IBPJ will find valuable. We also hereby extend an invitation to readers to visit the Wilhelm Reich Museum in Rangeley, Maine, both in-person and virtually, and to become acquainted with its programs and offerings.

Emerging from the halls of the Freudian school of psychoanalysis in the 1920s, Wilhelm Reich was dedicated to the unity of body and mind. His pursuit of psychosomatic medicine clearly establishes him as the “founder” of body psychotherapy and many of its variations. The intuition and clinical work that gave rise to Reich’s character analytic vegetotherapy originated at a time when Reich operated firmly within the boundaries of Freudian psychoanalysis. Ultimately, this work produced a transformational, robust foundation upon which many of the various somatic-centered modalities of psychotherapy were built.
Reich’s later study of the newborn infant, and his focus on prevention of ar- moring during early phases of development as the ideal path toward a better future for humanity, parallels and fore- shadowes subsequent neuropsychological investigations into infant bonding and attachment.

Whether it be Alexander Lowen, Fritz Perls, Arthur Janov, Will Davis, Genovi- no Ferri, Peter Levine, Stephen Porges, Bessel van der Kolk, Allan Schore, or Ron Kurtz – and this list could continue with dozens of pioneer researchers and innovators – the intersection be- tween the bodies of knowledge of these groundbreakers in the field of somatic psychology with the foundational work of Wilhelm Reich is striking. For those theorists and practitioners who are not well-versed in Reich’s work, there is much to be gained from studying the content of this intersection.

In addition to the innovations Reich developed in therapeutic theory and practice, his activities during the 1920s and 30s cemented his status as a thinker and courageous pioneer in other areas. Reich was a ferocious advocate for social equality, worked tirelessly for the elimination of repressive marriage laws and for en- lightened childcare provisions, stood for the protection of the rights of homosexuals, and so much more. He estab- lished the first sex clinics in Austria to bring treat- ment and birth control to the working classes, including adolescents. He put forth an understanding of the mass psychological basis of fascism, which continues to yield valuable insights to this day. The lasting legacy of Reich lives on, despite all the slanderous attacks on his repu- tation over the years. This legacy, in part, is sustained by and further developed through the efforts of the many body psychotherapists all over the world whose work is grounded in the tradition Reich established.

“The concepts of traditional psychology and depth psychology are bound up with word formations. The living, however, functions beyond all verbal ideas and concepts. Verbal language is a biological form of expression on a high level of development. It is by no means an indispensable attribute of the living, for the living functions long before there is verbal language.”

—Wilhelm Reich
Welcome to Orgonon
Reich’s Home and Research Center

On a hilltop nestled among the mountains and lakes of Western Maine in the United States sits a curious site – a stone structure of Bauhaus design. This is the centerpiece of Orgonon. Once Reich’s home and research center, this 160-acre (65-hectare) property was transformed after his untimely death in 1957 into a museum, conference center, and nature preserve.

The Wilhelm Reich Museum at Orgonon was conceived by Wilhelm Reich in his last will and testament. He wrote:

“During the years following 1949 my life was running its course within and around the walls of the Orgone Energy Observatory. I supervised the building myself for two summers. I paid out upwards of $35,000 from my privately earned possessions for the construction. I have collected here all the pertinent materials such as instruments which served the discovery of the life energy, the documents which were witnesses to the labor of some 30 years, and the library of a few thousand volumes, collected painstakingly over the same stretch of time and amply used in my researches and writings.”

The Wilhelm Reich Infant Trust operates the museum and its programs, maintains the property, administers the worldwide publication of Reich’s printed works, and also manages his extensive archive of letters, diaries, manuscripts, photographs, films and recordings.
The Wilhelm Reich Archives
What were once called the Archives of the Orgone Institute were for many years housed at the Center for the History of Medicine at the Countway Library of Harvard University. The Wilhelm Reich Museum has recently taken over stewardship of the Wilhelm Reich Archives and initiated an indexing and digitization project to preserve the materials and enable remote searching and access by scholars and researchers.

Education
Another core part of the mission of the Wilhelm Reich Museum, a nonprofit educational organization, is to promote understanding of Reich’s work through conferences and various online programs. In the summer of 2021, the museum sponsored an online conference entitled Wilhelm Reich and Psychoanalysis, which attracted attendees from over 15 countries. A hybrid in-person/online conference is planned for the first week of August, 2022 in Rangeley, Maine, entitled The Living Body: Wilhelm Reich’s continuing influence on contemporary psychotherapies.

The Wilhelm Reich Museum
The beautiful mountains of Western Maine are a popular destination in both winter and summer, and we encourage those interested in the work of Wilhelm Reich to come visit the Rangeley Lakes region and consider attending one of our summer conferences in-person. At the museum one will find a variety of interesting arti-
facts on display, along with Wilhelm Reich’s study and extensive library, painting studio, and the tomb in which he rests. Our conferences bring together attendees from various backgrounds and professions from all over the world, both in-person and online. Complete information is always available at wilhelmreichmuseum.org.

David Silver is Executive Director of the Wilhelm Reich Museum and has lived in Rangeley, Maine since 2019. A native of New York City, David has been involved since 1980 with the New York-based Institute for the Study of the Work of Wilhelm Reich, originally led by Victor Sobey, M.D., a student of Wilhelm Reich. David holds a B.F.A. in Film and Television and an M.S. in Computer Science, both from New York University.

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