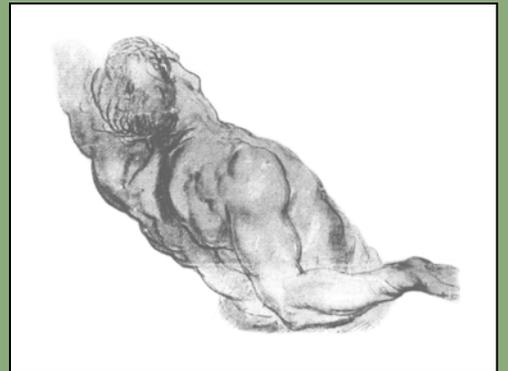


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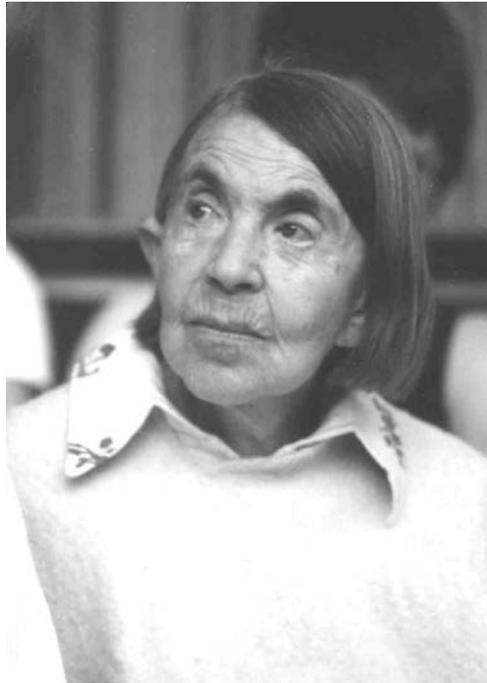


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Charlotte Selver

Born April 4, 1901 – Ruhrort, 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)

How Charlotte Selver Has Influenced My Work

Richard Lowe, MA, MFT

Abstract

In this article I describe how I was first attracted to the work of Charlotte Selver, known as Sensory Awareness, my assessment of Charlotte Selver's importance, her work's correspondence to psychotherapy, and how her work has influenced my work as an integrative psychotherapist.

Keywords

Direct Sensory Experimentation – Embodied – Fuller Organismic Responsiveness
Human Potential Movement

In the early 1970's after many years of Bioenergetic therapy and exploring various forms of what was then called "body work" I was fortunate to discover the work of Charlotte Selver known as Sensory Awareness. I found her way of working a breath of fresh air. Instead of being treated with techniques or being told what I was experiencing, or being told the right way to be, she led students in sensory experiments designed to help deepen awareness and responsiveness to actual sensations in the moment. This deceptively simple yet profound approach intrigued me as I gradually gained a fresher and more empowered sense of myself and of life.

Over the course of my many years of study with Charlotte and her husband Charles Brooks their skillful use of direct sensory experimentation helped me as well as most of the other students I observed becoming progressively more embodied and truly present. During this process it became clear that there were certain habitual tensions, attitudes and ways of perceiving things that were restricting my authentic aliveness. Over time, with keener awareness and fuller organismic responsiveness, these restrictions diminished more and more into the background as my sensing became progressively more awake, and as I became more oriented to the real world instead of the habitual world of my projections and inaccurate perceptions.

Charlotte was one of the most influential pioneers in the Human Potential and somatic movements. Yet I believe her true importance has gone largely unappreciated because she was so resistant to writing about her work. This was frustrating to many of her students, me included. Charlotte was loathe to define how she worked and would bristle at any suggestion that her work involved techniques, methods or exercises. Her way of teaching was mostly Socratic and experimental, asking questions and devising experiments through which students would discover in their own way and in their own time.

I must confess I can sympathize with her now as I struggle to describe how she has influenced my work as a psychotherapist. She did not train anybody but rather taught by example. The best way I can put it now is that my work with her has instilled certain principles in me that effect and inform what I do with my clients:

- 1 The way we show up in the world is a result of our attitudes and perceptions which are embodied in our very tissues as well as in our breath, our relationship to gravity and in our movement. These dynamics give shape to our sense of reality and thus shape our life.
- 2 The organism has profound wisdom particularly the more we can be more fully awake to it. It greatly helps, therefore, to rediscover this wisdom by developing through practical experience the capacity to more deeply sense the here-and-now realm of organismic reality.
- 3 It's important to help people experience that they are much more than merely a mind and much more than merely a body. We are usually in our imaginations or caught in our thoughts. All of us need to be more fully awake to what this person, this occasion asks of us. What is it to really show up and be more truly responsive to what life brings to us? Powerful changes in how we relate to our environment and to others happen when we are more fully present.
- 4 Encourage the person to stay with what is actually being experienced and let it develop and change. Help the person become aware of when and how he/she compulsively moves away from sensing. Becoming aware of how, when and where we are not sensing is an important part of becoming more alive.
- 5 "Body work", psychotherapy, and various forms of personal and spiritual growth, etc. can become traps in which a person becomes self absorbed and removed from real relating with others. Truer sensing and aliveness necessarily involve developing deeper relationships.
- 6 Experiments/experiences that involve real play are often the richest, for underneath the mask of adulthood lies the liveliness of the child within. Reawakening a sense of wholehearted being is essential to real health.

Currently I am not leading groups and mostly work with individual adults as well as couples and children. Many of the clients I see have initially no conscious desire to explore the quality of their sensing. In these cases I gradually introduce ways of exploring their perception as it relates to their presenting problem(s) and is appropriate to their situation. I usually devise experiments for clients to explore in session, and have found it quite helpful to give experiments to take home to try

out. Clients who are able to use a journal in combination with their “homework” experiments find the combination particularly productive. The element of writing to the self and from the self helps stimulate greater awareness and honesty.

As a psychotherapist I have found many fruitful relationships between Sensory Awareness and various psychotherapeutic approaches. For example, in the Humanistic/Existential work of Jim Bugental with its emphasis on deepening presence, with Adlerian Therapy with its stress on the importance of social interest, with Cognitive Behavioral’s focus on the dynamics of perception, the felt-sense Focusing work of Eugene Gendlin, the processing of here-and-now experiencing in Gestalt Therapy and in Virginia Satir’s work. There are many more such correspondences which I believe only lend evidence that Sensory Awareness, Charlotte Selver’s legacy, is a basic key to the development of human potential and real somatic health.

Biography

Richard Lowe, MA,MFT is a psychotherapist in private practice in San Rafael and Novato, CA, who specializes in Integrative psychotherapy with adults, couples and children. He studied with Charlotte Selver for over 15 years and was the first president of the Sensory Awareness Leaders Guild.

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