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CONFERENCE REPORT

Reflections on the USABP 7th National Conference, in Boulder, Colorado

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Body psychotherapy conferences offer participants an interesting mix of up-to-date research, current theoretical trends with introductions to new methodologies (and their promoters), academic advances, student poster sessions, publications and awards and commendations for those who have excelled in research and/or advanced the field, as well as coveted continuing education units. These events are also opportunities to learn, to network, to connect, to ‘schmooze’ and – always – to dance at the traditional gala event.

I attended the United States Association for Body Psychotherapy (USABP) 7th National Conference, in Boulder, Colorado, on 9–12 August 2012. As the Founding Editor of *Somatic Psychotherapy Today*, I went to ‘meet and greet’, to promote the publication and encourage submissions. I left each encounter with a different sense of accomplishment, a flush of friendship and a new awareness of body–mind therapy, somatic psychology and body psychotherapy. The USABP conference, entitled ‘The Body in Psychotherapy: The Pioneers of the Past – The Wave of the Future’, focused on those who had set the stage for what is happening today and for what may come tomorrow. The conference heralded a homecoming for many attendees as the first biannual USABP conference was also held in Boulder, in 1998. Camaraderie and collegiality were encouraged through morning warm-ups (tai chi, yoga), small group discussions, a facilitated ‘vibrational vocalization’ to unify the room and a generational circle spanning an age range from 25 to 90 years that was meant to highlight the wealth of background experience and the expanse of new horizons. There was a clear emphasis on creating community and on creating a holistic feeling within a somewhat fractured body.

Events were spread between The Millennium Harvest Hotel and Naropa University, the conference co-sponsor. Keynote addresses and panels were situated in the ballroom (a typical hotel venue with folding chairs and a small stage up front with podium and large white screen). Totally outside the normal purview was a hand-made muralesque timeline, the length of one wall. Participants were encouraged to add their name to the mural, to mark their contribution to the field in the context of space and time to create a

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living history. Awards and accolades were handed out during two formal luncheons held outside on the hotel grounds within a large white tent. Alice K. Ladas (a pioneer in the field who is in her 90s) presented the Alice K. Ladas Research Award for Outstanding Research Advancing the Profession of Body Psychotherapy by a Student to Daniel James Lewis M.P.H. for his work entitled 'Nina Bull: The Work, Life, and Legacy of a Somatic Pioneer', and then she presented The Alice K. Ladas Research Award for Outstanding Research Advancing the Profession of Body Psychotherapy to Gary Avram Glickman, Ph.D., SEP, for his work entitled 'Gender as a Relational Somatic Experience: How Body-Centered Therapy Might Be Participating in Gendering Clients (An Experiential Conversation)'. USABP President Katy Swafford, Ph.D., then presented the 7th USABP Lifetime Achievement Award to Albert Pessa, Ph.D. He made his way to the podium with a standing ovation. He bowed and then jokingly said, 'You've said it all' in reference to Ann Ladd who shared his professional achievements during his introduction. He accepted the award on behalf of himself and his wife and professional partner Diane Boyden-Pessa (she was unable to attend due to illness). He thanked her for both co-creating the Pessa Boyden Psychotherapy System and 'tolerating a lifetime' with him. Then Albert, aged 83, offered the audience a rare glimpse into his private life: leaving East Flatbush in Brooklyn, NY, with an adolescent's focus on body building based on the Greek ideal of a strong body and a strong mind and moving to Quincy, MA, where he started his love affair with dance and, through dance, with Diane. He shared how he and Diane met, and then he talked about their travels and their experiences as gypsies, as dancers, as parents and psychotherapists.

There were three pre-conference institutes available for an additional charge. Albert Pessa, Ph.D., offered 'The Drive to Be Happy in an Imperfect World'. Using the Pessa Boyden System Psychomotor approach, he taught participants how to remove clients' resistance in order to realign them to what he considers their genetic expectations that allow a happier life. The workshop consisted of videotaped sessions, lecture, experiential exercises and live demonstrations. Albert noted that attendance was low. Pat Ogden, Ph.D., presented 'Implicit Conversations, Therapeutic Enactments and Dissociation: A Sensorimotor Psychotherapy Perspective'. During the workshop (video demonstrations and experiential exercises), she explored dissociation and how to work within a clinical process that is 'safe but not too safe' to support integration of dissociative parts and the negotiation of enactments. And Jean-Jacques Joris, JD, MA, and his wife/partner Isabelle Joris shared their 'Mindfulness-based Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy' at their Twin Oaks Farm, about a 30-minute drive from the conference centre. The horses were said to be curious, intuitive, forgiving and non-judgemental. According to Jean-Jacques, horses mirror in humans what is relevant in the present moment and their behaviours offer metaphors for habitual patterns via the relationship that is created between horse and person that opens opportunities for embodied change. The day consisted of 10 participants and 5 horses moving through a series of exercises. No one rode the horses. It was interesting to be in a corral with five large, un-tethered horses wandering about and not being able to rely on my past experience based on halters and ropes to control but rather letting the horses set the pace and allow or not allow contact between us. It was fun to see Alice Ladas stand face to face with a fairly large Morgan (easily twice her height) as they came to

know one another. And the final exercise was fairly challenging as teams were formed and were given the task of creating an obstacle course of sorts using objects in the ring and then, without touching the horse, getting it to move through the course.

The conference workshops were held at Naropa's Paramita Campus (a bus shuttled participants between venues). Recent renovations at the campus included a meditation room, hallway space for the somatic-experiencing folks to set up a table promoting their process and a break room where afternoon tea and coffee was served along with sugary treats. The day started with plenary sessions and then the afternoon was split into two workshop times (between 1:15 pm and 6:15 pm).

The first keynote speaker, Robert Hilton, Ph.D., discussed 'The Ever Changing Constancy of Body Psychotherapy'. Through his journey to co-found the Southern California Institute for Bioenergetic Analysis, Hilton offered that, while techniques and modalities change over time, the outcome goal remains the same – the integration of mind and body. He shared an intimate history of self-growth as he spoke of his teacher's inability to give him what he needed and his subsequent search for missing pieces to complete his healing. His emotional intensity resonated throughout the room leaving him, and many others, dabbing away tears.

The Saturday morning plenary panel explored definitions of therapy in body psychotherapy in search of unifying and integrative themes in body psychotherapy clinical practice. Susan Aposhyan, Scott Baum, Marcel Duclos, Ryan Kennedy, Marjorie Rand and Lynn Turner – a well-rounded mix of published and academic body psychotherapists – along with moderator, Mark Ludwig, shared insights and answered directed questions related to eight themes thought to encompass the work taking place in body psychotherapy sessions, which included the following: non-verbal expression/communication; working with sensing; somatic empathy/resonance; regulation; integration interventions; movement; working with emotions; and working with body processes. The themes were intended to highlight why body psychotherapists must focus on unification and delineate common factors rather than particular points of view when approaching the question 'What's the therapy in Body Psychotherapy?' Panel members elucidated their theoretical understandings of what was happening and why. Concepts surfaced, such as reading bodies as a formulaic process is outdated as today's therapists track non-verbal communication including both subtle and expressive movements from a personal sense of embodiment, that sensing/sensory awareness was tied into empathy/resonance as therapists often use their own sensations to interpret what might be happening in their client's body while also teaching the client to feel into the body, to note pulsations, vibrations, tingling, numbness, and so forth. Autonomic regulation was approached within the guise of being an interactive psychobiological regulator for the client, while integration interventions were lightly touched. Movement moved into the forefront leading into working with emotions. Conversations included using the body to shift and change feelings (through movement) and building internal structures to track sensations, action impulses and behaviours. A weaving within the eight themes was apparent in the panel conversations with the final theme 'working with bodily processes' pulling it all together. The panel was designed to spark smaller discussions within table groups with facilitators condensing the group conversations into a specified format to be culled and written about at a later date.

The final plenary speaker, Frances La Barre, Ph.D., presented 'On Moving and Being Moved: Nonverbal Behavior in Clinical Practice'. She discussed how she integrated her psychoanalytic work with her studies of non-verbal research. Her multi-disciplinary approach draws from the fields of psychology, sociology, anthropology and neuroscience. During her presentation, Frances role-played three clients with distinctly different presentations during therapeutic encounters. She filled both roles – therapist and client – literally moving back and forth from chair to chair to facilitate the effect. It was a bit challenging to follow what she was doing and why, in part because it was extremely difficult to hear what she was saying.

The workshops were exciting for me because they were facilitated by classmates, USABP Board of Directors (Serge Prengel, Katy Swafford, Mary J. Guiffra, Lynn Turner), teachers I have had at both the Santa Barbara Graduate Institute (now closed) and The Chicago School of Professional Psychology (Christine Caldwell and Rae Johnson), and colleagues who either wrote about their work or let me interview them for the magazine's conference preview issue. Knowing the people, having some background sense of what they were talking about made the event personal and, alas, choosing which sessions to attend all the more difficult. With the conference focus on pioneers of the past as well as those bringing us into the future, I felt a sense of pride seeing my classmates share their work: Katje Wagner talked about the role of body in women's experiences of fulfilling their lives paths, Jennifer Tantia participated in a panel discussion on somatic psychology pedagogy, Gary Glickman shared his work on gendering and body psychotherapy, and Chris Tickner talked about his work with sexually abused men and somatic psychotherapy. Workshops featured in the magazine included 'Passion and Presence' with Maci Daye and Halko Weiss, 'Movement, Body and Identity: A Self-Inquiry Through the Chakra System' with Gisele Fernandes-Osterhold, 'Energy Medicine Meets Somatics: The Role of the Etheric Body in Body Psychotherapy' with Debra Greene, 'Community as Healer' with Linda Marks and a 'Neo-Reichian Approach to Dance/Movement Therapy' with Corinna Brown, and Meagan Pugh shared her work combing somatic awareness and creative arts therapies to 'Nurture Your Inner Tyrants' and transform protective strategies. The conference write-ups and presenter information are still available on the USABP website (www.USABP.org) and you can read more about the content and work of many presenters and plenary speaks in *Somatic Psychotherapy Today's* Summer 2012 and Fall 2012 issues.

In summary, the conference offered a divergent array of methodologies and theoretical standings. I am not sure what impact the conference had on Association members as individuals or on the organisation itself via its Board of Directors and new directions. I do know that my conversations with practitioners proved to me that involvement in our field is one of both passion and position, that therapist – be they psychotherapists, massage therapists, craniosacral therapists, energy medicine therapists and so forth – are immersed in their work and they are seeing the powerful intention of making space to unify and embrace all forms of body knowing to offer a truly embodied healing experience.

These conferences are usually biannual, with the next USABP conference in 2015.