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CONFERENCE REPORT



## Sexuality, spirituality and the body: the art and science of somatic psychotherapy. Report on the USABP conference, 20th–23rd July 2016

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The United States Association for Body Psychotherapy's Summer 2016 conference attracted 152 people to the three-day event held in Providence, Rhode Island, USA. Joan Borysenko, who, now in her 70s, was caught in the Southwest airlines chaos and arrived late and exhausted; yet, her keynote address on embodying spirit was engaging and enlightening. She received a standing ovation (and some loving hands-on Reiki after her talk). Barnaby B. Barratt shared his philosophical take on the significance of 'bodymind' visioning for the profession and the planet, and Michael Mannion discussed Wilhelm Reich's work. Two pre-conference workshops were noted to be well attended. Tina Stromsted, PhD, LMFT, LPCC, BC-DMT lead 'Embodied Alchemy: Authentic Movement, Neuroscience and the Somatic Unconscious', and Barnaby B. Barratt, PhD, offered, 'Is Our Access to "God" Sourced in our Loins? The Spiritual Call of Sexuality and Death.'

Daily workshops addressed sexuality and spirituality in the body. Lawrence Hedges explored 'Sexual Pleasure in the Light of Intersubjectivity, Neuroscience, Infant Research, Relational Psychoanalysis and Recognition Theory'. Maci Daye presented "'Getting Here" versus "Getting Better": Using Mindfulness to Overcome the "Performance Trance" in Erotic Recovery', while Andrew Hahn offered 'Psychology, Spirituality, and the Body: Bridging the Worlds for Healing Trauma'. Workshops covered gender variance, therapy with people of color, sexuality in Bioenergetic Therapy, sexuality and the sacred, integrating spirituality and body psychotherapy, and tending the soul's call through conscious embodiment.

USABP President Beth Haessig PhD offered the conference as one way to create an experience of coming together, to promote practitioners, and to give body psychotherapy a bigger voice around the world. USABP Vice President

Dan Mingle MBA noted that membership has grown since he joined the Board of Directors and hired administrator Linda Heck (who did an excellent job putting the conference together). Together, they have initiated advances including: redesigning the Association website; offering member sponsored webinars; forming institutional memberships to bring practitioners in our field together under their 'hub of everything somatic'. During the proceedings, Dr Eugene Gendlin was awarded the USABP Life Time Achievement Awarded, accepted on his behalf by Ann Weiser Cornell.

### **Keynote addresses: a brief overview**

Barnaby B. Barratt described himself as 'a bit of a radical from South Africa.' He noted that there were too many diverse perspectives on what healing is as well as far too much divisiveness in our field – it is time to create a unified vision, he said. Dr Barratt wandered about the room as he spoke, touched people he knew with a soft hand, a familiar word, a sense of connection. He was clear that there are methods but no techniques for healing and that few health care practitioners truly know what healing is. Healing, he said, is not manipulating or changing something; it is not adaptation to the environment. Healing, he offered, has an inner meaning, it addresses the irresolvable concepts of life and involves movement of subtle energy.

He delved into cultural impacts and divisions, e.g. class, race, social economics, subjugation and domination. We can no longer deny differences, our denial itself an act that perpetuates the current system of imbalance. Life is suffering, and we do not escape suffering because of our egotism, our dividedness, Dr Barratt said. Our need to dominate perpetuates suffering. However, we do not have to accept gaps either, such as the economic gap between the wealthy and the impoverished. Furthermore, we cannot simply abolish the differences between cultures; we cannot homogenize cultures any more than we can deny differences between species, sexes, and children and adults. We need to focus on how to relate to differentiation, not only in healing but also across our profession, he said.

Dr Joan Borysenko was dynamic. She began her career as a scientist and in time joined those seeking to understand the nature of mind and body, a movement that gave rise to mindfulness and the concept that the mind and body are embodied and embedded in our relationships. She covered the quality of healing relationships, empathy and healing, and love and health as she moved into stress and the body/mind. At one point, she checked with the audience about her presentation asking, 'How is this?' A thunderous applause came in response.

Dr Borysenko discussed what she considered new in 'bodymind' science. She talked about the 'mighty microbiome'. We have three genomes: our parents, our epigenome and our microbiome where our genetics/genes are present in gut bacteria. The biggest news of this decade, per Dr Borysenko, involves

our microbiome. According to Dr Borysenko, ‘three pounds of beasties have an ecosystem’ (in our gut) that function to: keep our gut lining intact; regulate our weight; regulate our immune function; reduce inflammation; and regulate mood by making neurotransmitters. She said increasing incidences in anxiety and depression in our culture are in part a result of the food we eat – it changes the bacteria in our gut. People in the field of body psychotherapy must talk about the food we eat, she said, stressing the point that gut microbes shape human behavior.

Michael Mannion gave an excellent review of Wilhelm Reich’s life and accomplishments. He succinctly covered both Reich’s personal and professional development and how Reich’s background informed his concepts of vegetotherapy, Orgone theory, and their implications. Mannion also discussed the orgone accumulator and the museum dedicated to Reich. According to Mannion, Reich was a ‘Promethean figure’, ‘boldly creative’, and ‘defiantly original’. Reich ‘took the concept of Life Energy out of the realm of metaphysical and scientific hypothesis and gave mankind a fundamentally new understanding of Life Energy as physical, demonstrable, measurable and usable.’

It may seem odd that members of the USABP would need an in-depth presentation on Reich and his work, but, in truth, a substantial number of practitioners in this field and in this association happened upon body psychotherapy through specific methodologies and obtained certifications in body-mind psychotherapy but not necessarily academic degrees. Practitioners who studied somatic psychology via a masters or doctoral program are assumed to have learned about Reich’s work; however, this is not necessarily the case. Mannion managed to inform those in the audience who knew nothing about Reich without boring those who had studied him extensively.

### **One man’s response: a pre-conference workshop**

Barnaby B. Barratt PhD, DHS stood out for me though confess I might be biased as Barnaby was a mentor and is now a friend. His plenary session was a blend of spiritually and meditatively based tantric practice. He offered an excellent juxtaposition of dance, movement and quiet meditation. There were several experiential exercises some done solo, others with a partner. We were invited to be aware of our bodily sensations, thoughts, and feelings. Some of the movements involved moving our body around the room while others had us stationary, moving portions of our bodies. The exercises were interspaced around Barnaby teaching and participants sharing their experiences.

We were asked to find someone to work with early in the session without knowing what the exercises would be. I chose the woman next to me who shared that she had recently moved to the Denver area (where my dad lives) from Europe, was married, and starting a coaching business (another area of

mutuality). Given that the session was based in tantra, it was not surprising that the exercises we did were intimate and sensual.

First, we washed each other's hands. Having someone else wash my hands, something most of us do several times a day, helped me to be more mindful of the process. How often do we engage in repetitive tasks throughout the day without bringing our attention to what we are doing? Next, we sat cross-legged with our foreheads touching for five minutes, twice. First we were directed to feel the other's presence within our 'personal space', then we were to explore our thoughts, bodily feelings, and emotions at having someone so close. As a body psychotherapist, I have done this type of intimate touching many times but not forehead to forehead; I remarked that I did not believe I had ever had my lips so close to another's for that long and not ended up in a kiss. Lastly, we gently stroked the other's face for five minutes as we saw the Buddha in them. While Barnaby referenced the Buddha, I understood this exercise to be addressing the soul/spirit/humanness behind the personality. He could have referenced the Hindu 'Namaste' (*Namaskar* or *Namaskaram*) meaning, 'I bow to the divine in you,' the Judeo/Christian '... you are the temple of the living God,' or any other spiritual or secular invitation to see the essence of the person upon whom we were gazing.

I received first, and while it was pleasurable and relaxing, it did not compare to giving. Partly this was because my eyes were closed and partly because I am a giver, rather than a receiver.

When I was doing the stroking, I felt so blessed just to be with another and offering love without any thought of getting anything in return; pure, unconditional giving and love. While many think of tantra as being sexual in nature, I took the exercises for what they were and simply relished the experiences. While I could imagine that many males would deem that level of sensuality and intimacy to be an invitation to make sexual advances, Dr Barratt held a sacred space for us, keeping the partner exercises spiritually based.

## Conclusion

Sex and sexuality remain uncomfortable topics for many clients and even therapists to discuss. Yet, sexual issues can and do interfere with our quality of life. While few studies have been published on how therapists can effectively initiate sexuality-related discussions with clients, current mental health literature does address the relevancy of both a therapist's sexual knowledge and comfort with sexual knowledge in the therapeutic relationship (Harris & Hays, 2008).

Using religion/spirituality as a therapeutic tool also remains controversial – religion/spirituality and psychotherapy have had an uneasy relationship for a long time though a recent study suggested that 'a vast majority of clinicians believe that discussing a client's spiritual view is valuable to the therapeutic process despite the fact that only a minority of clinicians do so in practice' (Kersting, 2003, p. 40).

Therapists cannot simply avoid discussing sexuality and spirituality in client sessions. As Dr Barratt pointed out:

... the systemic problems created by globalized capitalism is causing horrendous disparities in material wellbeing; the rise of evangelical fundamentalism and religious intolerance; the ecocidal disposition of our species, and the oppression of women, children and minorities. These crises are political, cultural, economic, ecological ... and spiritual.

He stressed the importance of the 'bodymind' vision of our humanity present in the healing modalities supported by the USABP.

This was not a conference for those with an aversion to sexuality or spirituality in a bodily and experiential sense. Presenters offered workshops to explore and integrate one's body with our sensual, sexual, and spiritual experiences. The overall tone of the conference was one of acceptance as well as curiosity and questioning. Yet, during the gala dinner performance by Melanie Rosen, many in attendance left the room; comments ranged from shock to complete disbelief and disgust as Rosen slowly stripped off clothing revealing parts of her 'body' on stage. The character she portrayed ignited confusion and compassion depending on personal presence and response. It was difficult at times to combine her dialogue with the costume she created and with her movements. She challenged the audience to experience a difference, a division, a chaotic moment in time that appeared to stem from a deeper unrest, a confusion of mind and body, of sexuality and being, of faith in life and in self. It felt as if her performance was designed to mirror the diversity present day-to-day at the conference in terms of the presenters and their presentations, in regard to the attendees and their background methodologies, theories and beliefs, but it missed its mark.

At the end of the three-day event, overall feedback was positive though the question of holding another 'live' conference versus a virtual event was in mind considering factors such as cost versus outcome, time versus availability, and presentations as well as people to attend them. The answer will be clear in 2018 if the USABP sponsors another conference.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes on contributors

*Nancy Elizabeth Eichhorn*, PhD, is a writer, an investigative journalist, and a credentialed educator with degrees in clinical psychology with a somatic psychology specialization, education and creative nonfiction writing. She is the founding editor of *Somatic Psychotherapy Today*, co-editor of the *International Body Psychotherapy Journal* and an editorial assistance for *Body, Movement and Dance in Psychotherapy*. She currently teaches and works as a writing coach, an editor and ghostwriter. Her writing resume

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