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CONFERENCE REPORT



The science of connection: Honouring our somatic intelligence: A conference report 2018 USABP National Conference November 1– 4, Santa Barbara, California, U.S.A.

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Two young women stood arm-in-arm at a microphone that was technically closed for further questions. Supporting one another in their embrace, they courageously made their request to the rather prestigious panel onstage: 'We want a response to Carmen.'

The audience at the 2018 National Conference of the United States Association for Body Psychotherapy erupted with applause. And Carmen Joanne Ablack, President of the European Association for Body Psychotherapy, who had been warding off tears of frustration and invalidation, visibly relaxed.

Ablack had shared her thoughts with the panel: Stephen W. Porges, winner of the 2018 USABP Pioneer of Body Psychotherapy Award, Judyth O. Weaver, winner of the 2018 USABP Life time Achievement Award, Christopher Walling, UABP President and Aline LaPierre, USABP Vice President, as they discussed the future of body psychotherapy. Ablack spoke about social justice, trauma, touch. She talked about the impact of diversity within the dynamic of a collective whole in hopes of galvanizing our collective embodied wisdom to help society restore a sense of safety and heal the current flow of violence and negligence.

The panel listened attentively. When Ablack finished, she noted that perhaps she hadn't asked a question but hoped she had offered enough to start a conversation. The panel sat silently for a few moments then Dr. Walling redirected their focus with another question. The audience's shock was palpable. Dr. Porges had just discussed the reality that violations are common in our society, but now we have the skills, the knowledge to repair violations to nervous systems waiting for repair. We understand violation and the physiological shifts that occur when one feels violated, he had said, and the resulting defensive narrative patterns that come to our unconscious rescue. Ablack was violated by their silence. Our nervous systems felt the violation; we waited for relief and repair,

and suspected that we were not the only ones in the room feeling this systemic response.

The women's unity, their courage to voice their request for respect mirrored one of the major changes felt at this year's national conference. The USABP's 2018 conference was the first under their new Board of Directors and Ablack's presence in Pacifica, California, USA, as well as Dr Walling's attendance at the EAPB's 2018 Congress in Berlin, Germany last September, heralded a muchly needed healing between the sister associations. The EABP BOD's disconnect and discord with the former USABP's BOD appeared to be softening. Ablack mentioned that she and Dr. Walling had taken part in many conversations over the weekend and in Berlin that were deepening their connection and their sense of collaboration, creating a real and enduring friendship, she said. She admitted that she had stayed up the night before her opening address rewriting her speech because of the interactions that had occurred. She shared what was 'written in her heart' during her opening talk and that she had 'tried to come here with an attitude of hearing you, being with you' and 'how pleased she was connecting with Chris'. As presidents, she noted, they share similar feelings of responsibility for their respective associations as well as being firsts: she the first black person as president in the UK and Dr. Walling the first openly gay, married man as president in the USA. Their initial focus on relationship-building for 2019 will be their jointly managed peer review journal – the *International Body Psychotherapy Journal*; they invited audience members to volunteer.

Rupture and repair. The science of connection. The feeling of unity. These themes permeated the conference's keynote addresses/lectures, panel presentations, and over 80 workshop offerings. The conference proper (there were pre and post workshops) began with Ablack discussing the importance of connection and safety in our field and offered the need for 'microconnections' to assist with the 'microaggressions' we live with daily. She and Dr. Walling agreed that our collective focus, as body psychotherapists, needs to be on the next generation and the world they are inheriting. As well, they discussed the need for unity and diversity and how to be with and accept both: unity in our diversity and the diversity that exists in our unity. Walling said that body psychotherapy has many names, many guises and we all need to share and challenge each other, with hope that the respective leadership continues to work and nourish the life of the associations. As we engage in wider international conversations, we will make our associations relevant, he said, and create greater awareness as we face outward as somatically informed clinicians.

There were three PowerPoint presentations honouring those who passed: Eugene T. Gendlin (1926–2017), Stanley Keleman (1931–2018), and Joop Valstar (1945–2018). And Alice Ladas presented the Alice Ladas Research Award to Hiroki Yamaji for his study titled: *An Efficacy Study of Somatic Psychoeducation*

at a Japanese University. Hiroki addressed the question of whether an 8-week somatic psychoeducation course for college students could result in students developing somatic awareness and trust in the organism, and enhance integral functioning that included general mindfulness, stress resilience, interpersonal empathy, responsibility for self-care, and generic skills.

There were four keynote addresses/lectures: Allan N. Schore, PhD, Stephen W. Porges, Judyth O. Weaver, PhD and Babette Rothschild, MSW. It is worth mentioning that the keynote speakers stayed for one another's talks. They all mentioned the other's content, wove points within their own. Typically, speakers do their thing then leave. This group presented a unified front.

Dr. Schore offered his normal keynote presentation style: he read from his PowerPoint. Truly a noneffective way to engage an audience. This reviewer appreciated Dr. Schore far more as he introduced and presented Dr. Porges with the Pioneer of Body Psychotherapy Award. Perhaps because it was more personal – they've been friends and colleagues for many years, having met in Orlando, Florida, USA at an applied psychophysiology conference in 1998 that resulted in a lasting friendship. Perhaps it was Schore's humour ... 'you think my words are complicated, get a load of this' before reading a passage from Porge's earlier academic writing followed with a heartfelt compliment noting Porge's 'remarkable transformation from a researcher to an elegant writer and presenter in clinical context' and his 'ground breaking discoveries'. If Dr. Schore's keynote addresses were as lively as this short presentation, he would have the same capacity as Dr. Porges to socially engage body psychotherapists as well as wider audiences in general.

Dr. Porges' began his talk by thanking Dr. Schore for bringing neuroscience into the trauma world making it possible for his work with the vagus nerve to be welcomed as well. He noted that he'd presented at conferences and workshops with body psychotherapists in the past and that he 'felt at home with this group', that we shared the same 'heart'. He was 'honoured and pleased' and 'shocked that groups of people embrace this (*Polyvagal Theory*) and use it to inform clients about their journey'. He then discussed the Polyvagal Theory in terms of connection, trust, and safety – the connectedness we share as humans (as well as via 'transspecies relationships', i.e. a child with a puppy). Survival, he said, requires mutual help and cooperation and that the fittest may also be the gentlest; our inherited nervous system requires connectedness. We need to co-regulate our biobehavioural state through engagement with others, he said. Along with familiar content, he shared his new directions including the Safe and Sound Protocol (see <https://integratedlistening.com/aw-safe-sound-protocol/for> more information) and his involvement with the Traumatic Stress Research Consortium, which is looking at the impact of traumatic stress on healthy relationships and on healthy sexuality (trauma@indiana.edu). We felt he was enlightening and awakening, present and safe. The audience offered a standing ovation.

Tina Stromberg introduced Judyth O. Weaver for her USABP Lifetime Achievement award, the second woman to be honoured the award's history. While many may know Dr. Weaver's work as a clinician, educator, presenter and writer, we assume that many were not aware of her vast involvement with the displaced Tibetan nuns and her dedication for so many years that the Dalai Lama offered his personal support. Weaver was described as a 'steward of the people and the planet', a 'lover of the wilderness, inner and outer', and 'close to the earth ... living her values.' Weaver shared her story and detailed her work in Tibet. Her soft and gentle mannerisms, her flow on stage, her energy resonated with her closing quote from W. Reich written in a letter to his son Peter while Reich was in prison, about to die: 'The best way is to just breathe and relax, let it come naturally, never force it, but let it come naturally and all will be okay.'

Babette Rothschild was ill and unable to travel for her keynote. The USABP team kept her connected via technology. She spoke for 45 minutes via a live conference feed, discussed her reasoning for creating a new autonomic nervous system chart detailing exactly what clinicians should look for, which is part of her revised edition: *The Body Remembers Volume 2: Revolutionizing Trauma Treatment*. Her honesty was appealing. She started with disclaimers: 'all theory is speculation' ... 'there are no hard facts' ... 'what most people offer are approximations – it's the best we have at this point'. She also offered a humorous note: 'I get paid for my opinion, I don't get paid to be right.' She hoped that people would both agree and disagree with her, saying that disagreements are necessary for our field of study to grow. Her writings and her new chart were created to help in clinical settings; she noted that 'too many therapists are not equipped to help with dysregulated nervous systems'. Her presentation style – personal, real, present – appeared to keep the audience's attention despite her being on a large screen and not truly there.

After Rothschild's talk, Dr. Walling noted a return to Saturday night's panel presentation to regroup and revisit what had transpired and offer Ablack more substantial feedback. A lively discussion ensued on privilege, microaggressions, and diversity. Ablack took the microphone and thanked the USABP for addressing the issue and explained that she was truly not offended. While there was mostly support for Ablack and for the leadership of USABP to augment the morning's schedule to address the issue, one conference attendee seemed to take offense. Taking the microphone, she stated that she identified as a bisexual and during her lifetime, thus far, she had had many male lovers who were uncomfortable with her bisexuality as well as many female lovers who were openly antagonistic at her taking male lovers. The woman said she ignored these microaggressions, as they were her partners' issues and projections; she just let go. She challenged the decision to return to this discussion – inferring that Ablack and the conference community needed to move on from the Saturday night situation and not spend any more time discussing it.

Another young woman then took the microphone and confronted her and, in this writer's opinion, tried shaming the woman to change her opinion; however, the dissenter would have none of it! The woman stated that while she was Caucasian and so could not address the racial side of the discussion related to the microaggressions of some of Ablack's statements, she wondered why her opinion was any less valid? Why should she sit silent when she felt triggered by the current situation?

Obviously, tension and dissent remained within the body of the Congress attendees. Conversations regarding diversity and all its ramifications are far from complete. We, as both the authors of this paper and conference attendees, can only hope that discussions will continue to ripple through our profession leading to more significant understanding and change.

Workshops, Panel Discussions, Seminars

To comment on the numerous workshops and panel presentations extends this review beyond its proper length. And in truth, there were so many workshops and panels it was impossible to attend them all. Dr. Walling explained they had tried, in the name of democracy, an experiment: anyone who submitted a workshop proposal was accepted. The BOD, he said, knew it would cause some stress (so many incredible offerings but no time); he was right. But the outcome was awareness – conference attendees experienced what is happening in our field (in person and reading about it in the conference handbook) that may have been outside their awareness. Simply reading about the possibilities invited conference goers to reach out and connect with those they wanted to learn more about, more from.

Overall the conference was a vast improvement from the 2016 Rhode Island experience. The location was far more fitting than the enormous cement conference centre in Providence, RI with its grand ballroom so large it dwarfed the small number of people who attended. The Pacifica Graduate Institute sits on a hilltop in Montecito, CA, affording views of the Pacific Ocean with its spiritual sunsets. Abundant areas of green grass and open space, comfortable rooms, meals that left most attendees overfull, onsite lodging, the retreat centre was the right venue for this event.

Dr. Rae Johnson, Chair of Somatic Studies at Pacifica Graduate Institute, opened her welcoming address with 'Beloved colleagues'. She shared her hope that the conference would be an enriching, transformative experience and that it might entice us to breathe deeper, move slower and connect more deeply. Overhearing comments from other attendees, reading reviews on Facebook pages and other social media, it appears that all were pleased with this experience and that indeed new and renewed connections occurred that have the potential to develop into deeper lasting friendships, professional and personally.