



Somatic Psychotherapy Today



Somatic Psychotherapy Today Volume 14, Number 2, 2024



Somatic Psychotherapy Today

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ANNOUNCING

Now On The Path Together

Somatic Psychotherapy Today magazine is now a part of the United States Association for Body Psychotherapy and Seeking Volunteers.



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NOW

Letter from the Editor

Greetings and Welcome to SPT Magazine Volume 14, Number 2, 2024.

This issue marks the completion of a circuitous route for *Somatic Psychotherapy Today*. I started SPT Magazine 14 years ago as a student editor for the United States Association for Body Psychotherapy (USABP). I was in class at the Santa Barbara Graduate Institute when an instructor I valued, Rae Johnson, asked me if I'd be interested in volunteering to edit the USABP's Association Newsletter. I had no idea what the USABP was; all I knew was that it involved writing and editing, which I love. I said yes without hesitation.

I was introduced to the current team in charge. I immediately connected with Serge Prengel, Jacqueline Carleton (United States team members), and our EABP alliances, Jill van der AA and Lidy Evertsen. They welcomed and encouraged me to write and be present on the page. While working with them, I realized we had a 'folksy' newsletter and a strict academic journal. There was nowhere for students like me who were immersed in our studies, research, and clinical experiences to share what we experienced and how our insights might impact our field. So, I talked with the powers that be, and with their blessings, I created *Somatic Psychotherapy Today*—many thanks to Diana Houghton Whiting (a colleague in the USABP) for being my graphic support person and phenomenal cover designer. At that point, I had tons of support from the USABP and the EABP (who made space for the magazine on their website and shared articles with their members).

The magazine flourished. Writers jockeyed to contribute. The value of these early articles is immeasurable. This was the first place to share 'magazine' articles, not peer-reviewed, by pioneers in our field, clinicians working with clients, and students just beginning to make an impact. I adhered to APA format, fact-checked and edited every article, sometimes writing with contributors and at times ghostwriting. I loved creating different layouts, which have evolved into calmer, more focused pages from the earliest editions. We published four issues a year.

As many body psychotherapists would say, the magazine grew organically. I knew little about marketing, had no budget, and had little hands-on help. Thankfully, colleagues showed up. People wrote and shared our links. SPT Magazine grew into its place in the literature. Libraries called asking for Index Numbers. Professors called asking for access to our archives. Universities allowed students to cite our articles in their Master's and Doctoral Dissertations.

Why?

Because SPT Magazine is a repository for quality (and research-validated) articles written by colleagues who have and continue to influence our field of study and practice. We offer space for unproven yet still valid new voices to share their knowledge and expand our perspectives on what is. None of this would have happened without the support of colleagues worldwide—thus my use of the pronoun We, versus I. We are a team of researchers, theorists, clinicians, and therapists joining in our passion for helping people find their wholeness and live their best lives.

Some might ask, where's the circle?

Over a decade ago, new teams took the helm at both associations; it was time for SPT to grow independently, which it did. We have 10K Facebook followers, and our posts reach a worldwide audience. We are open access—free to read and contribute—and here to support a platform for colleagues to share their knowledge. Our commitment remains the same: this is a community-generated magazine. Together, we will impact our world and bring body/somatic psychotherapy into the mainstream with positive results.

With this second issue, Winter 2024, we celebrate our homecoming to the USABP. Their team is collaborating with educational and professional organizations and individuals and together they are offering marketing resources and fresh ideas to take SPT Magazine to an exciting new level of outreach. I sincerely thank everyone for their tremendous support over the past 14 years. Your articles, insights, and feedback helped me support the magazine's growth. With the USABP spearheading our community, SPT Magazine will flourish in 2025.



Sincerely,
Nancy Eichhorn, PhD
Founding Editor-in-Chief

*The United States Association for Body Psychotherapy
Welcomes Somatic Psychotherapy Today!*

It is with great pleasure that, as president of USABP, I welcome *Somatic Psychotherapy Magazine* into the fold of our publications.

Publishing is a work of love, and we are honored that, after the years of dedicated care Nancy invested in creating her magazine, she is entrusting us to continue her work as an important mirror for our community.

At USABP, we work to strengthen the global presence of somatic therapy. SPT comes to take its place next to our peer-reviewed journal, *The International Body Psychotherapy Journal* (IBPJ), which we publish in collaboration with the European Association for Body Psychotherapy (EABP).

As a peer-reviewed journal, there was much that the IBPJ could not cover. Nancy saw that need and created SPT to fill the gap, shining a bright light on our somatic colleagues' day-to-day creativity.

It is fitting that these two publications now reside under one roof. They share the same goals and principles. Both are community-generated and free to read. By bringing our publications together, we can now support a platform that offers a full range of information—from peer-reviewed articles that cover research, case studies, emerging clinical practices, and interviews with community leaders who are charting new paths, and spearheading new theories, to book and film reviews, important online webinars and events, and musings that light up our creativity.

But if we are to fully represent our members and serve the diversity of the USABP Alliance of Somatic Educators, we need your help. If you have professional experience in publishing or see this as an opportunity to take your first steps in that direction, connect with us. We need readers, peer-reviewers, content and copy editors, designers, and social media communicators—wizards of all sorts to make a journal and a magazine happen.



The *International Body Psychotherapy Journal* and *Somatic Psychotherapy Today* are here for you—from established therapists to students and interns—to share your knowledge and be part of growing our profession. If you have work you want your colleagues to know about, or as a newly credentialed therapist, want that first opportunity to publish a paper, or let us all know about your dissertation research, we are here to make sure your good work is not left to gather dust on a shelf. We are a thriving field, and we need to make ourselves visible to ourselves first so that we know who we are when we take our message into greater venues.

Our community is made up of skilled, socially conscious professionals who are working to make a difference in the world. Our work of pioneering new, integrated awareness profoundly impacts those who experience it. As healers, we offer a refuge to those returning from the front lines—whether it be family, culture, or country. In the quiet of our healing rooms, we nurture, generate hope, and revitalize body and mind.

In times like these, it's easy to feel powerless. But there is something we can do: support each other through our communication, share our experiences, let each other know what works and what doesn't, and spread the word about who we are and what we do.

We hope that our publications unite us in a joint effort as we all work for a common cause.

Wishing everyone a joyous and connected holiday season,



Aline LaPierre

Aline LaPierre, PsyD, MFT, SEP
President — *United States Association for Body Psychotherapy*
Editor-in-Chief — *The International Body Psychotherapy Journal*

Binge Eating as Nervous System Dysregulation Turned Habit: Regulating Our Nervous System Through Somatic Strategies

Kristina Dobyys, M.S.

My Story

For over twenty years, my life was dominated by binge eating. Clinically speaking, Binge Eating Disorder (BED) is defined as a complex condition characterized by recurrent episodes of eating objectively large quantities of food, often rapidly and to the point of discomfort, accompanied by regret and shame. In real life, every decision I made revolved around avoiding or succumbing to the pattern. I crafted elaborate plans to stop bingeing that consistently failed, leading to cycles of shame and self-reproach. Opportunities were missed, relationships were shut down, and vast amounts of time, energy, and money were wasted on both bingeing and therapy. Despite my deep desire to stop, I found myself caught in a relentless cycle of bingeing, hiding food, and feeling utterly out of control. At my worst, I gained 100 pounds in three months, facing public humiliation and intense psychological pain.



My mother passed away in 2020 leaving me an orphan at age 38. Covid took the world by storm; I felt utterly alone, I was overcome by crashing waves of uncertainty and grief, and despite all my efforts, I was bingeing out of control.



My thoughts exposed raw vulnerabilities: *I've tried everything. I've done so many years of therapy, even intensive outpatient therapy; I've done neurofeedback, amino acid therapies, hypnosis, psychedelics, medication, support groups, special diets, no diets, reiki, acupuncture, everything under the sun. And all that exists is this eating disorder. I'm over this.*

This severe existential crisis led me to five weeks in residential treatment, questioning my life and genuinely scratching my head about what avenues I could pursue for recovery. I realized that despite my extensive participation in

athletics and attempts to connect to myself, there was a lot of room to grow. A disconnection between my mind and body still permeated my existence. I wanted to learn how to deepen my embodiment. It was as a result of this crisis that I began to truly pursue the role of my body in the recovery process and enrolled in graduate school to support my study as an academic as well as an experiential journey.

Over time, I experimented with different body-based movements and meditations. The most effective for me were sensory strategies that emphasized the body's crucial role in self-regulation and healing. For individuals like me, BED is not merely a psychological issue. Insights from my studies in somatic psychology and occupational therapy suggest that binge eating is a somatic manifestation of nervous system dysregulation. Cognitive behavioral therapies and other modalities such as acceptance and commitment therapy, internal family systems, or dialectical behavioral therapy only helped me to a certain point. I made intellectual progress in understanding my origin story and where I could benefit from more flexibility in my thinking, but I found myself still returning to binge eating time and time again. Learning how to use my body as a resource helped me to self-soothe, resist dissociation, and self-regulate in ways that were powerful, free, and always available. In my experience, by embracing my body as a vital resource, the path to recovery became significantly clearer and more attainable.

Somatic Strategies for Regulating the Nervous System

Given that binge eating (whether it is a diagnosed disorder or occasionally happening in the moment) may be a result of nervous system dysregulation, I first want to say that the autonomic nervous system (ANS) plays a critical role in our responses to stress and trauma. Dysregulation in the ANS can lead to maladaptive coping mechanisms, such as binge eating. Dr. Stephen Porges' Polyvagal Theory explains that the ANS has three states: social engagement (ventral vagal), fight-or-flight (sympathetic), and shutdown (dorsal vagal). When the ANS is dysregulated, individuals may oscillate between these states, leading to behaviors aimed at self-soothing or survival (Porges, 2001). The nervous system heavily innervates the gut, and trauma often manifests in eating patterns used to regulate or calm a dysregulated nervous system. This understanding helps remove the stigma and shame associated with binge eating, revealing it as a coping mechanism rather than a moral failing (Apigian, 2017).

Somatic psychology focuses on the body's role in mental health, emphasizing the importance of bodily awareness and body-based interventions when working with issues that are frequently categorized in the cognitive domain, such as BED. Traditional (cognitive) interventions for BED may include filling out food logs, noting black-and-white thinking or cognitive distortions, discussing self-esteem, talking about past events or relationships, or discussing nutrition. Body-based (or somatic or sensory modulating) interventions are "bottom-up" strategies that use the senses: sight, sound, taste, hearing, touch, proprioception, the vestibular sense, and interoception to improve self-regulation (Hollands et al., 2015; O'Sullivan & Fitzgibbon, 2018). Examples are smelling certain scents, putting on noise-blocking headphones, layering a weighted blanket over the legs, rubbing a certain fabric on one's skin, chomping on ice, jumping, or a variety of self-selected proprioceptive, vestibular, or other sensory strategies. Proprioceptive input, in particular, seems to be particularly effective, due to its regulatory effect through its direct influence on the brain stem (Blanche & Schaaf, 2001). Furthermore, while proprioceptive input will be processed in real-time, changes in motor cortex excitability may persist for up to 90 minutes (Wolters et al., 2003).

Occupational therapy (OT) has long utilized sensory modulating strategies to help individuals regulate their nervous systems. Occupational therapists often offer their clients a menu of options they can choose from. These strategies, initially designed for children with sensory processing challenges, may be effective for adults with BED. Research has shown that sensory strategies can facilitate remarkable change at the nervous system level, aiding in achieving a more optimal level of physiological arousal and improving overall functioning (Champagne et al., 2010; Hollands et al., 2015; Moore, 2005). Interestingly, sensory modulation is a term well-known in occupational therapy yet little-known in somatic psychology.

Sensory modulating strategies offer a de-pathologizing, present-moment approach that provides immediate, tangible relief through sensory engagement. They do not require high levels of cognitive awareness, making them accessible and practical for individuals under stress. For example, when a client snuggles under a weighted blanket (weighing between 10 to 25 pounds, depending on their body weight), the weight is evenly distributed across their body, and the gentle pressure engages their proprioceptive system. Hence, they are more aware of their body in space, which appears to have a regulating effect. They often report feeling calmer and more secure. Other examples include listening to a relaxing audio or participating in a yoga session or rocking slowly in a rocking chair. The proper sensory input is inherently regulating and can help with stress management. This can enable the participant to further access emotional regulation strategies. Clients can learn grounding techniques such as pressing the soles of their feet into the floor and incorporating deep breathing exercises with meditation.



In my research, I am exploring the intersection of sensory modulating strategies with BED by piloting an intervention of body-based sensory strategies such as self-massage of the hands and legs, self-tapping of the arms and chest, gently bouncing the knees, and – a la occupational therapy – a variety of options that the user may select from. The hypothesis is that these body-based approaches may help reduce the intensity and frequency of binge urges by fostering self-regulation, enhancing embodied awareness, and providing alternative coping mechanisms. Sensory modulating techniques have proven transformative in other circumstances, helping individuals stay present and grounded during moments of craving and compulsion. My research aims to bring more understanding to how sensory modulating techniques may interact with compulsive eating patterns.

Qualitative studies in OT have shown that sensory modulation strategies enhance embodied awareness and provide a greater sense of control. Forsberg et al. (2024) found that participants in a group-based mental health program using sensory modulating strategies reported improved coping and sense of self. The study emphasized themes like building bodily awareness, embodied learning through doing, moving from passive to active strategies, and applying a practical toolbox of bodily-directed strategies, i.e., physical sensory aides like fidget spinners (plastic toys designed with a ball bearing in the center of a multi-lobed flat structure that spins around its central axis) and stress balls (typically a malleable toy, usually small enough to fit in your hand). People squeeze the ball, push their fingers into it, knead it, etc., to relieve stress and muscle tension, as well as 'tool-less' techniques such as abdominal breathing. The participants were able to implement the sensory modulating strategies, which contributed to a sense of self-empowerment and their understanding of how their body and mind may interact and how they can purposely implement strategies to change their state. Participants highlighted the ease of accessing and applying these strategies even during high-anxiety moments, distinguishing them from many traditional talking therapies (Forsberg et al., 2024).



Case Studies

Case Study 1: Integrating Sensory Modulation with Somatic Work

Sarah, a 35-year-old woman with a history of BED, sought therapy after traditional CBT failed to alleviate her binge episodes. Sarah learned to identify and regulate her nervous system states by integrating sensory modulating strategies from OT with somatic work. In the somatic work, her focus was on beginning to recognize early warning signs of urges to binge and realize what being regulated and dysregulated felt like in her body. She worked on bringing awareness to her bodily states and tracking her sensations: where they were located, what they might indicate, what thoughts might be there, how the sensations shifted, and how long they lasted. She was able to implement traditional OT techniques like using a weighted blanket when she began to notice she was stressed and engaging in rhythmic yoga movements, such as reaching her arms up and exhaling as she lowered her arms, repeating this for several minutes. She reported that these techniques helped her feel *in her body*, countering the dissociative pull that characterizes BED. Over time, Sarah reported a significant decrease in binge episodes and an improved sense of well-being.



Case Study 2: Sensory Modulation in Group Therapy

In a group therapy setting, sensory modulating strategies were introduced to participants with various compulsive behaviors, including BED. Every week, different techniques were reviewed with the group using a sensory cart— a mobile cart with a host of items such as essential oils, plushy fabrics, weighted blankets/vests/stuffed animals, fidget toys, a vibrating ball, a sound machine, and visually evocative photos, such as serene landscapes, close-ups of textures, vibrant geometric patterns, or soothing pastel hues. Throughout the week, they were encouraged to practice the techniques and interact with the sensory cart as much as they wanted. The group reported enhanced coping mechanisms, reduced anxiety, and improved interpersonal relationships. Sensory modulation's practical, hands-on nature allowed participants to apply these strategies daily, leading to sustained improvements.

Conclusion

Viewing binge eating as a somatic manifestation of nervous system dysregulation opens new avenues for treatment. By integrating somatic strategies, we can offer practical, accessible, and effective interventions for individuals struggling with BED and other compulsive behaviors. These strategies may provide immediate relief and foster long-term self-regulation and embodied awareness.



Kristina Dobyms is a PhD candidate at the California Institute of Integral Studies. She holds a Master of Science in exercise science and a bachelor's degree in psychology. She helps clients recover from compulsive eating and binge eating at BeyondBingeEating.com. She can be reached at info@BeyondBingeEating.com

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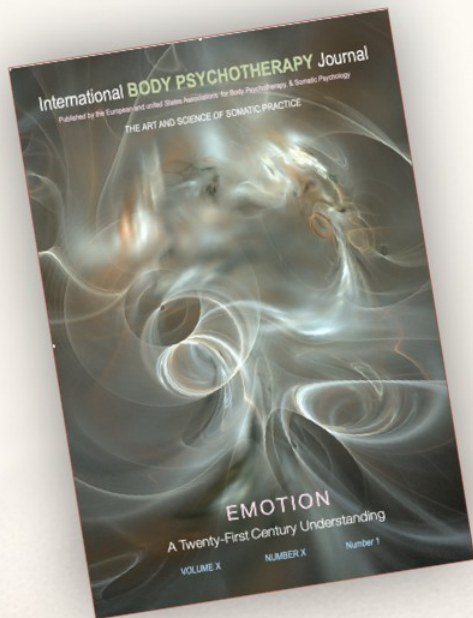
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Our latest issue presents a 21st century integrative, interdisciplinary understanding of emotion. Drawing on the latest developments in embodied cognition, emotion, enactivism, and body psychotherapy, we offer a rich array of thoughtful directions that move the understanding of emotion beyond entrenched concepts toward new perspectives of the self as a developmental emergence, arising from the seamlessly integrated flow of emotional, cognitive, and behavioral processing systems.

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POLYVAGAL PERSPECTIVES

STEPHEN W. PORGES

Reviewed by Nancy Eichhorn, PhD



In the Beginning

As a laboratory scientist, Stephen W. Porges felt driven to understand what he called the vagal paradox. He noted that humans have two vagal systems: one orchestrates calm states and social engagement behaviors, while the other— a vestigial defensive system—is potentially lethal to mammals. Porges wanted to understand how the vagus nerve was both protective (when expressed as respiratory sinus arrhythmia, RSA) yet threatened our lives when expressed as bradycardia and apnea. His research identified the vagal mechanism underlying the paradox, which evolved into the polyvagal theory (pg. 24).

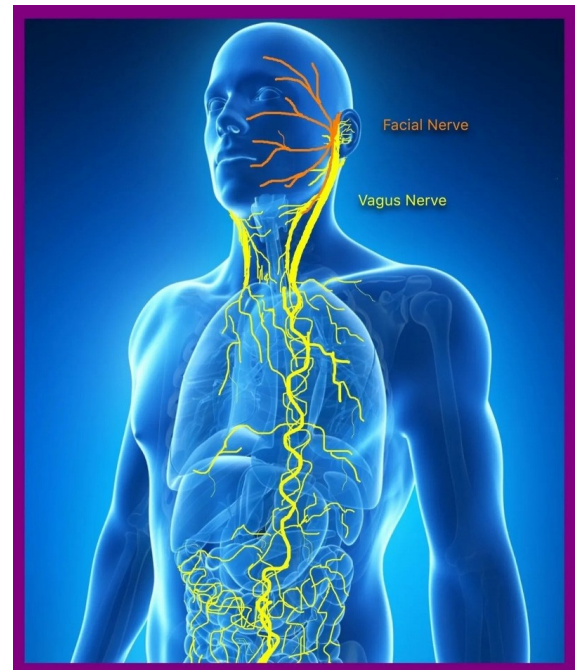
When Porges presented his polyvagal theory (PVT) in 1994, his work reframed our clinical understanding of the autonomic nervous system's role in mental and emotional health, including its impact on stress, resilience, social connections, and our sense of feeling safe (which allows us to reach out and connect with others).

Decades Later

After decades of witnessing misunderstandings and misrepresentations, he wrote *Polyvagal Perspectives: Interventions, Practices, and Strategies* (the title is taken from a paper he published in 2007) to set the record straight. He wanted to “clarify his original theory and rectify potential misunderstandings by documenting its scientific foundation” (pg. 24).

Porges didn't propose that PVT be proven or disproven. He wanted further research to inform and modify the theory and provide “a perspective to frame research questions—it is not a static theory” (pg. xiv). PVT consists of two components: a series of hypotheses “driven and future-oriented which could potentially lead to enhancements of mental and physical health” (pg.70) and a descriptive model. Porges wanted to emphasize the role of our autonomic state as “an intervening variable in how we respond to internal and external cues” (pg. 71).

Porges offered scientists a challenge to “incorporate an integrative understanding of the role neural mechanisms play in regulating biobehavioral processes” (pg. xiv). He offered his polyvagal perspective to encourage “a shift in research from theoretical strategies toward a theory that drives paradigms dependent upon explicit neural mechanisms” . . . “Foremost, a polyvagal perspective emphasizes the importance of phylogenetic changes in the neural structures regulating the ANS” (pg. xiv).



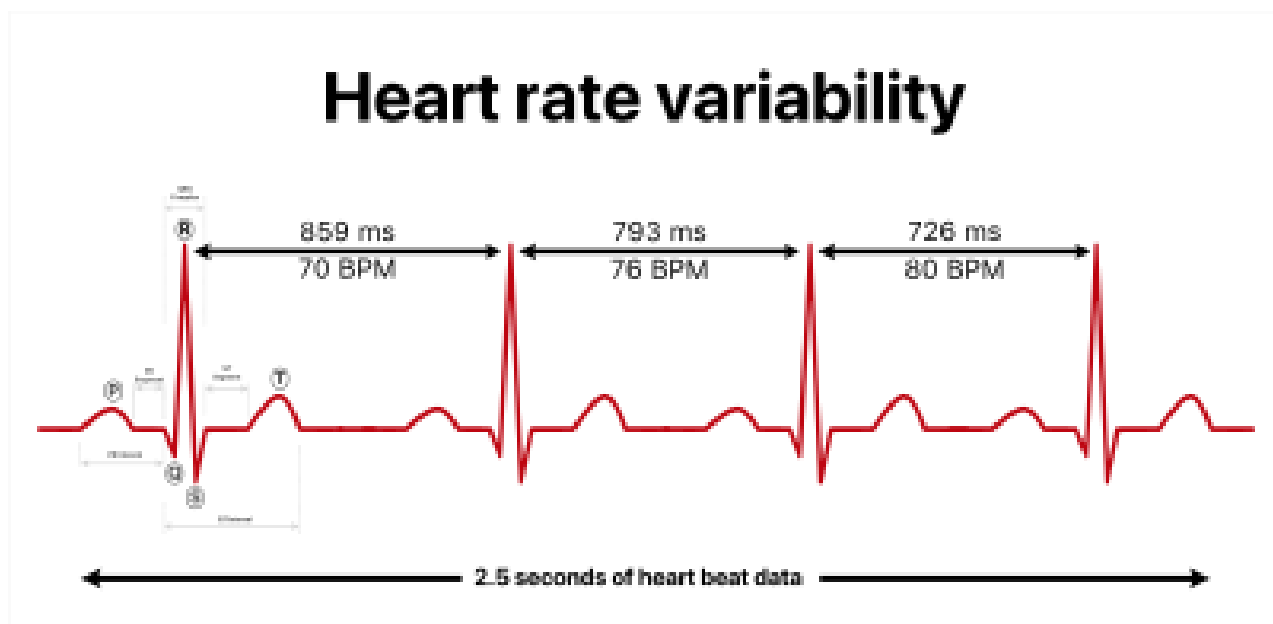
Part II involves clinical applications of PVT. Three topics include appeasement and the Stockholm Syndrome, sensitive patients, and neuromodulation. Porges used computerized altered music to treat a ten-year-old child with a functional neurological disorder as part of his Safe and Sound Protocol TM (SSP).

Part III looks at ways to monitor and stimulate the Vagus. It's part memoir and part historical essay. Porges writes about his seven-decade journey to study heart rate variability (HRV). He was a 21-year-old graduate student; his work was dependent on technology to measure and quantify beat-to-beat activity, so he used cast-off parts to build a machine to measure HRV. He eventually focused his work on psychophysiology when he discovered systematic changes in HRV during tasks involving sustained attention. He wanted to identify mental effort and intentionality from physiological signals.

Part IV is titled Brief Papers. Five previously published papers cover cardiac vagal tone, addiction, autism, Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome, and empathy and compassion.

Part V incorporates five previously published blogs and a 2017 interview with Christina Devereaux from the American Dance Therapy Association. The focus is on the nervous system and its role in survival and safety. Porges discusses ways to keep cool in high-stress situations—aka the anatomy of calm. Porges and a co-author frame Vladimir Putin's physiological state from a polyvagal perspective. Putin, they offer, is stuck in a state of mobilization, meaning he "can no longer access his prefrontal lobe and the behaviors it supports, i.e., the ability to self-regulate, connect with others, receive support, offer support to others, be flexible and resilient" (pg. 257). He lives with an overriding sense of danger (hypervigilant) and alarm, feeling "a dominant sense of injustice and unfairness in what for him is a dangerous world" (pg. 257).

The appendix includes an extensive list of sources for all information shared, a bibliography, and excerpts from his 2007 paper introducing the concept of polyvagal perspectives.



In General

As always, Porges writes well, documents his work with data and references, and uses an academic tone. He integrated new data to support older references and updated several concepts. Articles were republished so readers will note repetitions. While some may find this frustrating, the reality is not everyone can access all of his articles in peer reviewed journals and books. I find it useful to read similar content in different situations to see ways to flexibly use the data. The interviews are not laden with academic terminology but one still needs a background in PVT to participate.

Porges discusses the five principles of PVT and the hierarchy of autonomic reactivity. He confronts PVT critics head-on, noting that their negative responses are based on inaccurate misrepresentations of the theory (pg. 49)—they articulated incorrect versions of the theory. He deconstructs their arguments to show that PVT was scientifically supported, thus nullifying their claims that PVT was false.

He offers neural excisions to improve vagal efficiency, the neurophysiological foundation for our capacity to be self-compassionate and to build trusting authentic relationships. He also talks about ways to use dance and movement, breath work, and grounding exercises to help people mobilize in safe states.

One Last Point: Catching My Attention

Porges' discussion on the neurophysiological roots of empathy and compassion and why some people can't feel one or the other from a polyvagal perspective caught my attention. I never considered empathy a reflexive bodily reaction to pain and suffering in others, an automatic/unconscious response. He writes that empathy is an adaptive shift in our physiology, preparing our body to attack, defend, protect, escape, etc.

Compassion is not a given. First, we feel empathy, then compassion, but only if we are free and clear. If someone else's pain triggers our own too profoundly, we can remain stuck in defensive states—we might not be able to return to a parasympathetic state. Compassion depends on a two-step process for the vagus nerve to calm our feelings of threat and discomfort. First, our social engagement system clicks in, allowing people to return to a sense of safety and connection, which depends on our ability to move between physiological states that support empathy and compassion flexibly. Toggling back and forth involves 'vagal efficiency'—"the effectiveness of our vagal brake in dynamically regulating heart rate and metabolic output to match the demands of the environment, interaction, or situation" (pg. 227).

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Mindfulness Built for Two

By Kate Cohen-Posey

Are you a regular meditator but feel stymied when it comes to making mindfulness a vital part of client treatment?

You aren't alone. Solitary meditation is one thing; two-way mindfulness in an attuned relationship is another.

A regular sitting practice eluded me until I discovered Tim Desmond's *Dialogical Based Mindfulness* (2016) and then, later, mindfulness-centered psychotherapy (now called Hakomi, Weiss et al., 2015). I fell in love. I learned how to summon states of curious, compassionate consciousness as *the* agent of change in therapy sessions. Every approach I had learned over fifty years coalesced. I began to dance with my clients mindfully. But not all of them.

When clients come to us in crisis with racing thoughts, potent emotions, and harsh inner voices, didactic approaches to awareness training are not easy. After noticing their breath for a few minutes, people may be accosted by thoughts: *I can't do this; It's just another thing for me to fail at; or I have too much to do*. Beginners need to practice persistence before they experience meditation's benefits, like improved concentration, reduced reactivity, and even lower blood pressure. In a culture where immediate gratification is expected, people often give up.

Interpersonal Mindfulness: Chatham

When I saw Chatham's name on my schedule, my heart sank. Thus far, I had not found the spigot to turn off his firehose of words. Attempts to establish treatment objectives slipped through my fingers like sand. *What am I supposed to do to help this person?* I thought.

And so, we began our fourth telehealth session. Chatham was going on about his investments and then launched into the details of a conflict over the equity in a house he owned with his mother and how she "manipulated" him into doing a 9-1-1 check. In a voice edged in ire he said, "She found out I would respond to her in an emergency. She has so much power over me!"

Somehow, I managed to establish a therapeutic alliance by rephrasing key points of the topics he unleashed, saying, "All of these issues are truly important; how can this session help you with them?"

To my astonishment, there was a brief pause, and Chatham asked, "Is my anger valid?"



In mindfulness-based therapies, the next classic move is to connect people with their bodies. Arousing thoughts are accompanied by somatic sensations. Focusing on tightness, heat, or heaviness in the body is like dropping an anchor to steady a ship in a stormy sea. Sensations are a great focal object for mindfulness.

But, before I could even ask Chatham how he noticed his anger, my "difficult" client added, "Wow, my heart is really pounding, and there's all this tightness below my shoulders."



From Brain-Body Connection to New Perspectives

I began my mindfulness spiel. "You're so observant to *notice* those sensations . . . Maybe you can tell how strong they are on a 0 – 10 scale." He reported they were a ten plus. This intensity suggested that he needed resourcing, so I offered a suggestion to help him contain his intensity. "Perhaps there is a picture of your dog on your desk," I said. He affirmed with a nod. "You could *focus* on that picture, possibly on its eyes (*for a hit of oxytocin*), and *be curious* if the sensations in the chest change . . . They could get stronger, or your heartbeats could slow down. Could you *tell me*

what you're *noticing* now?" He confirmed that his heart rate had dropped slightly, but he still felt tightness beneath his shoulders.

"Good!" I said, "You're doing great. We're just *observing* your body, *not thinking* about the things you mentioned before. The part of you that notices is so powerful. It might say to any tension that is left, 'You have every right to be here . . . We can handle you.'" Chatham yawned and pardoned himself. I continued. "It's so good that you yawned . . . It's a sign that everything is slowing down, and yawning can cool the brain . . . Maybe *you'll discover* something else in the body after that yawn."

I carried on this mindful dialogue until Chatham reported, with a puzzled expression that all the tension was gone, and his heart rate was normal. I asked if he was willing to do a little exercise, explaining that I would take over some of the words he said and suggested that he *notice* anything that happened in his body, his mind, maybe a memory or an image, or even calming quiet. He nodded slightly; I repeated, "Your mother found out you would respond to her in an emergency."

Chatham responded soberly, "Duh, that's what any son would do." His negative cognition, "*She has power over me,*" had transformed into a positive statement of agency.

Ties that Bond

It is well known that the counselor-client alliance is a key factor for successful treatment. Desmond begins building a connection in an ordinary state of consciousness: “Do you want to talk about some of the things that are happening in your life or explore what could help you with all of this?” His use of client choice is brilliant. It subtly distinguishes between chatting versus having a desired outcome and underscores the idea of a collaborative partnership.



A Hakomi session often begins with mindfulness, either with clients using their own practice or the counselor giving a few simple instructions: “You can connect with yourself in whatever way is good for you, maybe *noticing* how deep air goes down, how long you exhale, or something else, taking all the time you need to *find out* what is calling your attention.” The words “find out what is calling your attention” evoke an intention.

Once the issue *du jour* has been established, both parties are on the same page. However, this is only the beginning of the interpersonal linking needed for two-way mindfulness. Chatham’s inner work starts with an *acknowledgment* that validates his reality— “All these issues are truly important.”

Desmond begins this poignant joining by asking, “Let me make sure I understand . . .,” and then names specific feeling states and desires. Hakomi uses “contacting” tags: *baffled, huh? . . . a little gloomy; tears just behind the eyes . . .; a nice breath there . . .* These pithy phrases name emotions and nonverbal expressions. Comments are expressed tentatively, often beginning with the word *maybe* or ending with a quizzical, *huh?* Bonding with someone requires curiosity about all the nuances of their experience until therapists have their own felt sense of the person’s struggle.

The final step in inter-hemispheric connection involves feedback. After Chatham’s heartbeats slowed, I suggested, “Maybe you can *tell me* what you’re noticing now.” This allowed me to assess how he was responding to my prompts. Feedback is essential to dialogical mindfulness. It requires people to report their internal experience as it shows up.



From Looking For to Letting Come

Once the dialogue that bonds is developed, proper mindfulness can begin. But what is mindfulness? Jon Kabat-Zinn's well-known definition could be reworded in the affirmative: *paying attention on purpose, with loving presence, moment by moment* (2003). Author and Buddhist teacher Sylvia Boorstein's (2024) depiction is well-suited to interpersonal mindfulness: *Receiving the present moment, pleasant or unpleasant, without either clinging to or rejecting it*. This is a tall order for solitary meditation, but having an engaged "outside Witness" makes receiving unpleasant moments without rejecting or clinging doable. We might think of this as an external Witness evoking another person's internal Witness.

While working with Chatham, I aroused inner awareness by using such words as

"Be curious."

"Notice."

"We're observing, not thinking."

"The part of you that observes might say to any tension, 'We can handle you.'"

Evocative language changes can-you questions into hypnotic truisms: "You can notice anything that happens in the body, the mind, maybe a memory or even calming quiet." Covering all possible responses implies that something will emerge.

In the Present Moment: Leslie

The practice of mindfulness requires making the shift from past to present. As some clients tell their stories, recent or remote events can seem devoid of life. This was the case with Leslie, who matter-of-factly proclaimed during our telehealth session, "I'm obligated to my mother because of how terrible I was as a teen."

She was now approaching 40. Asking her to recount the details of her never-told youthful "transgression" opened a doorway to the present.



After a childhood of being sheltered from movies, parties, doing anything with friends, exorcisms to root out gay tendencies, and bullying that she said “she deserved,” Leslie finally found freedom in college. On a lark, she bought a sixty-dollar bouquet of flowers for her girlfriend on the family credit card. The next time she came home, her mother launched into a lecture. “Sending flowers to another woman; how could you?! I’m disgusted!”

In a faltering voice, Leslie divulged, “I started choking her; I lost all control. I could have killed my own mother.” Her chest heaved as she sobbed and whimpered. I encouraged her to take her time until the emotional gush subsided.

“So much guilt, huh?” I snuck into a pause. “I’m curious how you notice that regret.” Leslie reported great heaviness in her chest and goosebumps on her arms. I encouraged her to take a moment to be with the heaviness. After a bit, I said, “I’m wondering what the twenty-ish you was thinking just before she grabbed her mother’s neck.”

“It felt like my mom was choking me with her words, so I choked her back,” she said in an edgy voice. “I would have been charged with intent to kill in a court of law. After distancing for years, I now bend backward to cater to her every whim.” Past happenings became present with weightiness in the body, mental anguish, and catering behavior. Re-living buried sensations and associated emotional fallacies made the memory malleable. Once opened, inner wounds are operable.

From Past Falsehood to Nobel Truths



Desmond might suggest an *exercise* in compassion: “You can discover what happens inside when you tell yourself, ‘Even if you reacted rashly, the hurt twenty-year-old-you deserves some tenderness.’”

In Hakomi, *experiments* offer a missing experience. Feeling understood may be what is most lacking during life’s rough patches. Speaking to her younger self, I illuminated

the painful points of Leslie’s tale: “Really terrified yourself . . . So many years of bottled-up anger . . . Seems like a part of you stopped you from going too far.”

Then, I offered the essential missing element: words that reversed defeating beliefs acquired in formative years. The intent of stating positive positions is to unearth any notions that block taking in new truths. Asking Leslie permission to consider a novel possibility, I proposed, "You can tell your twenty-year-old self that she can trust herself . . . she will never strike her mother in the future."

There was a long pause before she replied, "I need to protect my mom because if her own daughter would hurt her, other people could do even worse."

I labeled that as a *thought* that could be true or not true (mindfulness of thoughts). The session continued to sashay from soma to psyche and back again.

While Leslie was still deep inside her thoughts, I asked if I could tell her a little-known fact, and with her consent, I said, "Assaults on women are more likely to happen by relatives." I let that sink in for a few moments then added, "The past many years of distancing and then later being at her beck-and-call prove you gained restraint."

She noted that the sadness in her stomach lessened. What followed were recollections of her sister's vitriol and her brother's violence. I tossed another positive prompt into the pool of mindfulness: "Maybe your siblings are not yours to control."

Her mind meandered beneath an un-furrowed brow. "They are both like the wind, like a cool breeze," she murmured. Moment-to-moment mindfulness was becoming more spacious. Leslie had left the well-traveled roads of negative thoughts into transcendent meadows full of mysterious wisdom and ethereal images. Perhaps therapy needs to aim higher than defeating beliefs and schemas to dwell in the present moment, just noticing, without the need to change what is forever changing.



I asked permission to speak to the college kid who had lashed out at her mother. After she offered an agreeable nod, I said, "It really did feel like your mom was choking you with her words . . . After years of being a target . . . being so sheltered . . . and even exorcisms . . . it's understandable that you grappled with her."

Leslie's breath slowed, but she looked attentive. "It's like I'm seeing the branches swaying on a tree . . . The leaves are moving; some are floating . . . This has been so liberating."



From Separate Selves to Transpersonal Unity

In Chatham's case, mindfulness of somatic sensations bore mental flexibility. For Leslie, the past had become a prologue to a life of maternal servitude. This required an evocative recounting of preceding events to awaken body memories. A balm full of understanding and new knowledge could then be applied to mend former misunderstandings. Not only had I jumpstarted Leslie's inner Observer as the witnessing therapist, but my words had sparked lost inherent realities in transpersonal time and space.

Mindfulness built for two evolves into an open focus where whatever arises frame-by-frame is named, observed, allowed, and supported. New connections are made, and sometimes, voices beyond time and space appear, delivering noble truths by studying what has been percolating in the silent depths of the mind.



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For further study of mindfulness centered somatic psychotherapy contact: <https://hakomiinstitute.com/>, or <https://www.hakomieducation.net/>.

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Kate is also the International Body Psychotherapy Journal (IBPJ) Fall Winter Guest Editor covering the topic of prenatal and perinatal somatic care.

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The Father Figure in Uncertain Times

By **Genovino Ferri**



Introduction

This article was born from the intention of putting together a number of “interpretative lenses” to provide a four-dimensional, or 4D, perspective. This is to say that we should also associate the fourth dimension, time, with its bottom-up arrow with the three highly visual dimensions of height, breadth, and length while including corporeity.

This offers a contemporary, Reichian-analytical perspective, recounting the birth and transformation of the Father figure, indicating certain bifurcation points in its evolutionary verticality from the beginning of time through to today’s instantaneous, horizontal, accelerated existence.

The wish is to comprehend the complex contemporaneousness of our uncertainties and perhaps to offer some more appropriate relational patterns with the Other-than-us world. In particular, the object of study is the Father figure in his existence in the “living social body” over the history of our evolution, together with the implications of the network it is correlated with.

An eye to both respect for and the inclusion of all emerging factors within current social reality is intrinsic to the article, even though it also underlines the beyond threshold, which may often connote some of these.

It is a body psycho-analytical description seeking to clearly articulate the container-contained interaction, placing greater emphasis on the container: Being a Father figure is an organisational, evolutive state in the sense that this "paternal" role may be performed by men, or by women and by individuals, but also by groups.

This article offers a four-dimensional vision to better examine the lineage of the intelligent, negentropic sense of the phenomena we are immersed in. And it represents the opportunity to be other than mere linear dyadic thought. It aims to stimulate the capacious inclusion of phenomena while conserving the luxury of differences and the definition of limits.

1) Uncertain times– the deposed father

Today, we are witnessing the removal of the Father from his role as the symbol of the West's patriarchal family- we are witnessing the erosion of the Family and the consequent removal of the Father.

With the Acceleration in External Time, the Superego, the internal regulator of human behaviour, has moved out and no longer dwells within the family. It has moved into social media, which is polluted by impulsive-consumerist primary orality, chock-full of primitive, reptilian-brain patterns, originating from the most archaic of our three stratified brains. The parents, the previous repositories of the Superego, have been lost and become disenfranchised and the father has been disqualified and is effectively absent.

External Attractors have perpetrated the theft of time from the affective relationships within the family and, being no longer able to sustain the respective bonds with its own energy, the family has become disorganised and dissipated.

Every individual has their own outward-pointing vectors, seeking connections with external objects that carry connotations of importance as indicated by the Superego. Paradoxically, the "new" Superego is a guide which is, itself, out of control, often only serving the unrestrained, beyond-threshold goal of making a profit at any cost.

There is no longer "Internal Family Time" and children are now drawn much more towards instant emotional gratification and far less to building sentiment over time.

Most human beings relate to the world using patterns featuring compulsive, consumerist traits in an eternal present, which, today, interacts with individual narcissism another beyond threshold primary oral pattern. This occurs in a social setting in which "we are both all together and, at the same time, profoundly alone."

All patterns involving taking and seizing control of are inferior, lower-rank patterns compared to the capacity for self-control and planning over time, which are more highly-evolved patterns and, historically, part of the father's area of competence.

Using this evidence as the basis, it is relatively simple to formulate a clinical diagnosis Society's "social body" is now affected by depression masked by acceleration! In terms of neuromediators, the acceleration in the experiencing of time has led to beyond-threshold dopamine (DA) levels (the neuromediator responsible for action), which produces an imbalance in the interaction with the other two neuromediators, serotonin (5HT- affectivity) and norepinephrine (NA- alarm).

In particular, the acceleration in dopaminergic time leads to the theft of serotonin from affective relationships, which, in turn, provokes norepinephrine-based alarm, hyper-activating dopamine again in a pathologically-repetitive cycle. This theft of serotonin from affective relationships is the first factor contributing to the disintegration of the Family.

The balanced equilibrium between the three neuromediators has been lost, as has the hierarchical equilibrium of the three brains. The result is the dominance of the more primitive reptilian-brain, mainly utilising one particular pattern- the Other-than-me / Different-from-me is enemy and is threatening.

Today, we live in a liquefied, rarefied modernity which is coming apart at the seams. That is to say life is more instantaneous and less well-founded, there is more excitement and less awareness, more communication and less relationship, more information and less knowledge.

There is often only one "present", although, sometimes, there may be two- the Mother-Child dyad, but there are very rarely three, in a relational interaction also frequented and inhabited by the Father.



2) The phylogenetically-intelligent sense of the father-figure

According to Edgar Morin, the important phenomenon leading to the evolution of homo sapiens was the birth of the "Father." Evolution selected males who provided for their children because it gave them a greater chance of survival. Being a Father required having greater discipline and self-control than those who remained "solely males."

Animal socialisation was, thus, transformed into human society with the passage from irregular mating behaviour to the first kinds of couples. Once there are couples, it becomes implicit that if all males produce offspring, then those that provide better for their children give them a greater chance of survival, by not being merely males, but by also becoming "Male-Fathers."

Thus, the origin of the Father lies in this transition from nature to culture and, as Edgar Morin states, culture rests upon early, pre-cultural complexity, which is that of primate socialisation.

I would suggest that the Father figure represents an organizationally significant evolutionary step along life's arrow of time, bearing in mind that this paternal role can be taken on by a man, or by a woman, and by individuals, or by groups.

During human history on our planet, the role of the Father has primarily been performed by males. For much of the time that life has been present on our planet, evolution had ignored any form of maternity or paternity and, indeed, only quite recently, on life's journey, did evolution introduce the division of the sexes.

In animal species males have a quantitative function and only a relatively small number of males would be sufficient to sustain population levels on Earth. The female, on the other hand, has a qualitative function and there are limits to the direct number of offspring that she can produce.

In humans, the Father is not as near to the child as the mother is in early life, and tends to intervene later in ontogenesis, after the biological dyad with the mother and predominantly after weaning. In phylogenesis, too, the father arrived later, when he took on the responsibility of being the *adgredior* (aggressor) for the couple in terms of socialisation beyond the family.

Among early human pairs, it would be the Father who would leave the safety of the home area to hunt, defend or fight. The Father was born on the distant horizons of prehistory, as we were moving out of zoology and drawing closer and closer to anthropology— this is the fundamental step that gave rise to human civilisation. Seeking out the Father is, thus, an ancestral, archetypal theme and is a response to a universal, psychoemotional need for uplifting and growth.

Analytically speaking, I would suggest it is the need to achieve "the three," a position for three way interaction, which is able to open up the closed dyadic system and intercept and interact with positive, vital energy in a new way.

Is the male chest an indication of this? In Contemporary Reichian Analytical terms, isn't the extraordinary fourth relational bodily level which carries the double valence of expressing both affection and aggression– "with outstretched arms inviting an embrace" or "the threat of raised fists"– telling us about the double role of the father across the millennia? Could this double valence be partly responsible for the difficulty some fathers have in giving and receiving hugs ?



3) The father from a psychoanalytical perspective

Psychoanalytically, the word Father is associated with leadership, the provision of food, upbringing and teaching the child how to behave, to respect limits, the law, responsibility and ethical considerations.

This identikit certainly does not match the role of the Father in uncertain times, because the masculine-paternal identity has now largely disintegrated. Consequently, there is either regression to the "male-animal", that has laid dormant beneath paternal expression, with the consequent risk of bands of males, roaming a fatherless society.

Or there is the type of "new Father" defined by Luigi Zoia as being a lethargic, uninvolved spectator, copying the Mother's positions and leaving those roles assigned to the Father since the dawn of humanity unfulfilled.

But what does a child expect from their Father?

The child wishes to feel that their Father is close by when things are going well, yet, even more so, they wish to feel their strength. They want to feel that their Father is strong and successful, with higher-rank, guaranteeing safety and survival, rather than just providing affectivity.

Many children distance themselves from a mild Father to confer their admiration upon someone else who expresses their aggressiveness more openly. The child expects the Father to be good and fair, but before that, even, they expect strength. For today's children the Father and Mother have been moved to the sidelines. The Father's authority has been reduced and his status is lower. However, we shouldn't forget that our subconscious cannot remove, in only two or three generations, something that it has held dear for millennia.

The Father is constructiveness, planning, organisation, intention and memory. The Father often carries aggressive-defensive armouring and even when he embraces his child this double-valence is present. It reflects the child's divergent expectations of him kindness and strength, tenderness and potency, affectivity and assertiveness. This paternal armouring serves as defence against 'other Fathers' outside the family unit and protection from growing siblings or a partner within the family behaving competitively. In order to maintain his shell-like armouring, the Father tries to remove or effectively shut off those relational dwelling-areas, or 'apartments' of his personality dating back to the time of his primary relational experiences, the time of absolute dependence. He does this by wearing his armouring, even when by himself, on his Chest-Neck area, distancing himself from that yearning against primary separation still located in the Abdominal-Umbilical area.



The Father seemed to have found support in early psychoanalysis, but many of Freud's successors have marginalised him again. Indeed, psychoanalysis has always given more emphasis to the primary maternal figure, finding common ground in this with the correlated tendency towards disengagement from certain aspects of socialisation in favour of greater individualism.

However, the importance of 'Corporeity', as bodily expression, in Contemporary Reichian Analysis, reminds us of something important. It implies that different guidelines should be followed in that there may be dysfunctional etiopathogenetic questions, which may have arisen not only during primary maternal time, but also during secondary, paternal, family time, or even during tertiary socialisation. These "windows" represent each of the three fundamental, evolutive Fields that we pass through as we grow up.

It is a Corporeity that bears the marks incised onto each of the successively-acquired apartments representing our personality, which contain not only the narration of our own personal life-story, but also that of humanity itself.

4) The father's place in history

Our project must be associated with the future in a similar way to how our past is associated with memory. It should teach our children "memory", providing them with regular 'doses' of 'father'.

Let us briefly consider our historical evolution.

The image we have of the Father formed from Greek myth, from Roman law, from Christianity, from the French revolution, the industrial revolution and from the world wars. The Ancient Greeks reacted to the prehistoric males' original insecurity by armouring the Father and protecting themselves from that yearning against separation, which would have crushed them back into being the dependent males of primary time and back into the myth of the creative-destructive Great Mother from before the emergence of the Father figure. The Ancient Greeks' reaction was, however, beyond threshold, establishing, as it did, the Father's superiority over the Mother. The Ancient Greeks' patriarchy was the continuation of the paternal revolution that had begun in pre-history and it reached its zenith under them. They represent the civilisation that raised the Father highest over the Mother, but they also gave rise to European civilisation and the rich, complex Western culture, which would export patriarchy to the world.

The Ancient Greeks created ideal, universal role-models through which their children could exalt their Fathers, such as Hector the pure hero, Achilles the furious or Ulysses the astute. Even the Gods were a patriarchal group living on high, the Sky was male and the Earth was female.

Rome rose after the Ancient Greeks' decline and went on to continue the patriarchy. However, the Ancient Romans took another step– they did place the Father higher than the son, but they added that legitimate Fathers must make a public declaration of their wishing to be a Father to their child. Fathers in Ancient Rome had the right of life or death over their sons for their entire lives and were also their teachers.

The three members of the Holy Family in Christianity, seemed to clear the way for a return towards ancient, earthly, female values. Christ supports in alliance with the Father and the role of Mary gives strength to the Mother. The West adopted Christianity, which lends itself extremely well to supporting the Father figure, yet, at the same time, it was disseminated by force, as survival of the fittest, and we might ask ourselves whether or not it genuinely carries that double structural valence of the Father's chest established over the millennia.

Later, it was French Society that produced a more radical re-invention with "Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité" and the world's vertical axis, in family terms, became horizontal. Children wished to elevate themselves, no longer expecting their Father to do so. The industrial revolution and the two world wars together finished off the existent social structure by breaking it up. The Father figure was cast away towards the unknown, becoming distant and invisible.

The child no longer really saw the Father and was not aware of the Father's activity. Paternal ordering slid entropically downwards and away into the background. The Father's main task was no longer to be a master of life and a moral compass, but, rather, to be the male hunter seeking income and success.



5) The father in the future

The greatest height that can be reached in being a person (etymologically derived from the Latin *personare*, meaning to "sound through", "resound" or "resonate") may be taken to be the capacity to resonate and pass through the different 'apartment areas' of our own life stories, from which we may choose where to 'dwell' for our own relational interactions, including for any roles as 'Mother' or 'Father'. Given this, I might suggest Humility is the key to learning to make journeys of relational-positioning self-aware and metacommunicative.

In this way, Subjectivity can learn to govern re-positioning on the different floors of our own character's 'Apartment building' and can no longer be 'imprisoned' in the shell-like armouring of just one particular relational apartment, originating from one specific stage of our life journey. Subjectivity becomes aware of space and time and, aware not only of the contents of that apartment in which it may habitually reside but also of other apartments. It becomes aware of the 'apartment' in which the other person resides and it knows about the co-construction of precious relationships.

There is not, then, male and female symmetry, nor is there symmetry between the Mother and the Father figure, nor are there bands of males or of females. There is no uterus-envy or breast-envy, nor any penis-envy. The future is complex and greater intelligence is required of us to deal with the presently-existing symmetries.

In the last few decades, some environmentalists have elaborated theories criticising anthropocentrism, which, together with feminist criticism of patriarchy, accuses the West's Male-Father of devastating the planet and of robbing women and all other forms of life. The Male and the Father are in the midst of a grave identity crisis, as are women and young people.

Society risks collapsing back to a primary, maternalised existence, or of falling into wild, entropic chaos. It is absolutely clear that the implicit request emerging from this, psychoanalytically-speaking, is for a "new" Father.

All that is constructive in these criticisms must be heard, cherished and made productive as part of a new "paternal" project within a restored equilibrium based on a higher evolutionary platform. It must bring the Male-Father back out of his regressive blindness in chasing success and profit; it must bring the Father-Male's affective chest back into play, together with his authoritative neck and intelligent eyes offering higher, more complex ethics.

On an individual scale, by removing the rigidity with which a Mother may manage the primary field (inside her and caring for the young) and the rigidity with which the Father figure may manage the second (the outside and those values already mentioned), then our destination is no longer the "lower" primary relationship, but, rather, a new, "higher", three-way interaction, a new equilibrium and rebirth along the arrow of evolution. Reconnecting to cosmological history, to body-to-mind human history and to our own life histories, means the Male-Father being re-directed towards a new form of verticality that includes his primary vulnerabilities (the needs of his inner child) in being a 'man' and a 'Father figure.' We should not be removing those vulnerabilities, but neither should we be allowing them to dominate. In this way, the Woman-Mother (who is more limbic) is also directed towards a new verticality, which includes the secondary, conserving female assertiveness, but using it in alliance with the male-figure and not in imitative-symmetry with the "accused" male.

On a larger scale, the implicit request for today's new Fathers coincides not only with the archetypal request to ensure survival and the continuity of the species for their children, but also to move back from the horizontal to the vertical. In Contemporary Reichian Analysis you would say "to dwell in higher analytical-corporeal apartments which are further from insufficient primary orality (from the 6th to the 2nd relational bodily level) and, in particular, to inhabit the dorsally-straightened neck (3rd), which guarantees the atlanto-axial joint a more intelligent visual horizon over time, granting a perspective which reveals the possibility of a new, future upright stance."

Ensuring the continuity and survival of the species today is still an ethically and evolutionarily "paternal" project, but it is everybody's responsibility to save Life and the Biosphere on this extraordinary living Planet. This needs 'Us' and 'Together with', the female and the male, men and women, parents and young people and new Fathers-to-be. We need Survival Intelligence together with Emotional Intelligence and Cognitive Intelligence. In some ways this idea bears similarities with the ancient builders' "cathedral thought-patterns" (Pievani), who were well-aware that the finished cathedrals would only be admired by later generations.

In this way, by reading the Complexity of living systems in four-dimensional, stratified depth (height, width, length and time), our bright future reappears. Better-organised, authoritative evolutive stages based on higher principles, mean that a dignified, Male Father figure reappears as a man worthy of being held in high esteem.

Genovino Ferri is a psychiatrist and Reichian Analyst trained by Federico Navarro, who was himself trained by Ola Raknes, who was, in turn, trained by Wilhelm Reich. He is the Director of the Italian School of Reichian Analysis (S.I.A.R.) in Rome, Italy, a post-graduate college of higher education. The college offers higher degrees in Psychotherapy for Bachelors of Science in Medicine or Psychology and is recognized by the Italian Ministry for education, higher education and research (Ministero dell'Istruzione, Università e Ricerca). The school is accredited by the EABP FORUM of Body Psychotherapy Organizations. He has been a member of the New York Academy of Sciences since 1999 and is also a member of the International Scientific Committee for Body Psychotherapy. He is an International Trainer of Contemporary Reichian Analysis in Europe and South America (including Rome, Athens, Sofia, Berlin and San Paolo, Cordoba). During his professional career, he worked as the Director of the Psychiatric Unit at Atri Hospital, in Italy, and as the Director of the Public Psychotherapy Service for the Province of Teramo, Italy. He is also the President of the Italian Association of Body Psychotherapy (A.I.P.C.) and is the founder of "Studio Analysis" a social-centred psychotherapeutic clinic in Atri, Italy. He is the Editorial Director of the CorporalMente series by the Alpes Editore publishing company.

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The Influence of Fear: From Franklin D. Roosevelt to Modern Neuroscience

By Jennifer Zach



Fear can paralyze a nation. Franklin D. Roosevelt inherited chaos when he was inaugurated as the 32nd president of the United States: the banking system had collapsed, unemployment had soared, and the economy had hit rock bottom—it was the Great Depression. Facing a national crisis, Roosevelt sought to reassure a fearful nation by proclaiming, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." His message aimed to shift the national mindset from despair to hope, encouraging Americans to recognize the pervasive power of fear and its ability to stop forward growth and further darken an already bleak situation.

The same psychological truths about fear apply today. Thanks to advances in neuroscience, psychology, and the social sciences, we now have a deeper understanding of fear and its effects on the mind and body (Porges, 2011). As Roosevelt implied, much of what we fear may not be life-threatening but rather perceived threats; these fears often amplify through the stories we tell ourselves (Porges, 2011). Understanding the nature of fear—both in Roosevelt's era and our own—can offer valuable insights into how we respond to adversity and how we can learn to navigate our fears more effectively.

The Biological Basis of Fear

Fear is an essential survival mechanism embedded deep within our biology. It triggers the amygdala, a part of the brain responsible for activating the fight, flight, or freeze response, which helps prepare the body for survival by releasing stress hormones like adrenaline and cortisol (Porges, 2023). Throughout human evolution, this response was crucial for escaping life-threatening situations, such as an encounter with a predator. However, this mechanism also activates in modern situations where the threat is often perceived.

Whether real or perceived, the release of stress hormones prepares the body for immediate action—raising heart rates, quickening breath, and tensing muscles. This heightened response is beneficial when dealing with actual threats. However, chronic activation of this response can lead to detrimental effects on health, such as increased anxiety, high blood pressure, and weakened immunity (Porges, 2023). While fear is necessary for survival, it can become harmful when sustained over long periods or triggered by non-life-threatening situations.

Real Versus Perceived Threats

A key distinction exists between real and perceived threats. The amygdala, however, does not differentiate between the two. Its sole purpose is to keep us alive (Levine, 1997). Imagine mistaking a stick for a snake. While the threat response may initially help ensure survival, we have unnecessarily expended energy if the snake is, in fact, a stick. Similarly, when fear is triggered by perceived threats—such as fear of failure, rejection, or embarrassment—it can cloud our judgment and limit our ability to think critically (Levine, 1997).

As Roosevelt suggested, much of what we fear in everyday life does not stem from real dangers but perceived threats. Fear of uncertainty, for example, can drive individuals and organizations to act defensively, stifling creativity and strategic thinking (Brown, 2018). In today's fast-paced world, where complex challenges require innovative solutions, this kind of fear-induced paralysis can have significant consequences.

Understanding Fear Through Modern Science

In 1994, Dr. Stephen W. Porges developed the Polyvagal Theory, offering a deeper understanding of how the human nervous system, specifically the vagus nerve, helps regulate emotional states, social engagement, and responses to fear (Porges, 1994). The vagus nerve, the body's longest cranial nerve, travels from the base of the brain through various organs, acting as a bi-directional communication superhighway (Porges, 2023). It plays a crucial role in either signaling safety, promoting calm and social connection, or triggering the fight-flight-freeze response in times of real or perceived threat (Porges, 2023).



Porges' theory explains how cues of safety such as a friendly face or calming environment can help settle the nervous system (Porges, 1994). On the other hand, signs of danger, whether real or perceived, can prepare the body for survival (Levine, 1997). This understanding helps explain why individuals feel stressed or anxious even in the absence of real threats. The modern world is filled with stimuli that may trigger this response, from social media to political uncertainty, making it harder to feel safe and connected.

The Broader Impact of Fear

Fear not only affects our survival mechanisms but also impacts cognitive processes essential for success in today's knowledge-based economy. Decision-making, creativity, leadership, and social engagement all suffer when fear dominates. Roosevelt understood this on an instinctual level when he urged the American people to rise above their fears (Roosevelt, 1933). His speech helped spark a national movement, instilling hope and confidence in a country that desperately needed it.

The pervasive nature of fear in our modern world underscores the importance of developing strategies to manage and mitigate its effects. Chronic fear, even when stemming from perceived rather than actual threats, can lead to short-term thinking, impulsive decision-making, and strained relationships (van der Kolk, 2014). Reducing fear responses, therefore, not only benefits individual well-being but also enhances creativity, problem-solving, and collaboration.

Addressing Fear With The 3N Model

Modern mind-body practitioners recognize the detrimental effects of unchecked fear and offer valuable strategies for navigating fear. One such model is the 3N Model: Notice, Name, and Navigate, which helps individuals move through fear more effectively by increasing awareness of physiological and emotional responses to fear (Zach, 2023).

Notice: The first step in managing fear is to notice the physical sensations that accompany it. Whether it's a clenched jaw, tight shoulders, or rapid breathing, recognizing these bodily signals is essential. By noticing these cues, individuals can practice self-regulation techniques, such as deep breathing or mindfulness exercises, to calm the nervous system and prevent the stress response from escalating. This simple yet powerful step equips us with a practical tool to manage fear in our daily lives, enhancing our ability to stay calm and focused in challenging situations.

Name: Once the physical sensations of fear are noticed, the next step is to name the emotions and distinguish between real and perceived threats. Not all fears are equal, and naming the emotions helps individuals understand the difference between genuine danger and perceived threats. Naming emotions also helps develop emotional intelligence, enabling individuals to respond more thoughtfully and empathetically to challenging situations.



Navigate: Finally, navigating fear involves using self-regulation techniques to course-correct in real-time. This can be as simple as grounding oneself by focusing on a pleasant visual or sound, allowing the prefrontal cortex—the part of the brain responsible for rational thinking—to stay engaged (Levine, 1997). By navigating fear effectively, individuals can remain calm, make thoughtful decisions, and avoid overreactions.

Fear As A Catalyst For Growth

As Roosevelt recognized, fear has the potential to either paralyze or propel individuals forward. By understanding the biological and psychological aspects of fear, individuals can learn to leverage it for growth rather than letting it dominate their lives. When approached with the nervous system in mind, fear can drive individuals to higher levels of performance, preparation, and perseverance (Zach, 2023).

Modern practices such as mindfulness and meditation offer proactive ways to strengthen the prefrontal cortex, helping individuals manage fear responses before they escalate (Siegel, 2007). These practices also promote creativity and innovation—skills that are often compromised when fear is allowed to dominate.

Rising Above Fear

Franklin D. Roosevelt’s assertion that “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself” remains as relevant today as it was in 1933. Fear is an inevitable part of the human experience, yet it need not control us. By understanding the biological underpinnings of fear, distinguishing between real and perceived threats, and using strategies like the 3N Model, individuals can navigate fear more effectively and leverage it for personal and professional growth. In an ever-changing world filled with uncertainty, developing resilience and emotional regulation skills is essential for long-term success. Just as Roosevelt inspired hope during the Great Depression, we, too, can rise above fear and move forward with courage, creativity, and confidence.

Jennifer Zach is the coach you want when the stakes are high. She is an ACC, a certified mind-body coach, integrative somatic trauma therapist, and founder of Zach Coaching, LLC. As the author of *Somatic Awareness: Leading with Body Intelligence*, she draws on her expertise as an author, speaker, and executive coach to empower clients to make clear-minded, intentional decisions. Jennifer is recognized in various publications and conferences, including *choice magazine*, ATD's ALC Conference, *TD Magazine*, *Training Magazine*, and the Iowa SHRM Conference. Jennifer has also been featured at *DisruptHR*, solidifying her reputation as a thought leader in leadership and somatic awareness.

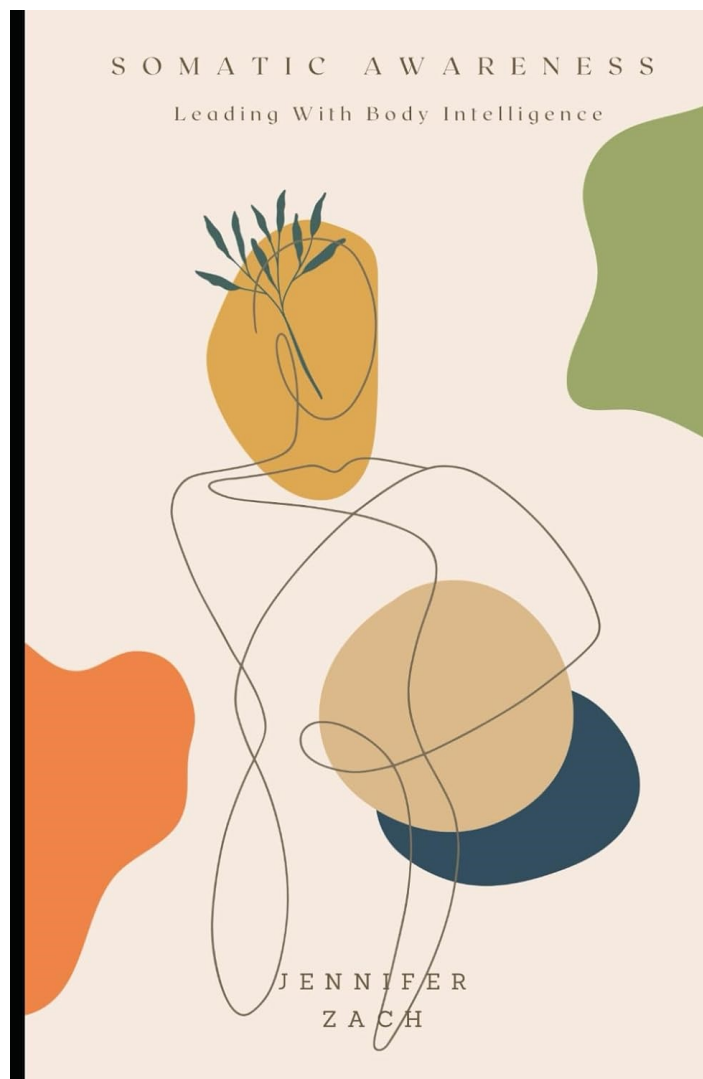
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Edited by

HERBERT GRASSMANN, MAURIZIO STUPIGGIA,

and STEPHEN W. PORGES

SOMATIC-ORIENTED THERAPIES



**Embodiment, Trauma,
and Polyvagal Perspectives**

Somatic-Oriented Therapies: Embodiment, Trauma and Polyvagal Perspectives

Edited by Herbert Grassmann, Maurizio Stupiggia,
and Stephen W. Porges

Reviewed by Nancy Eichhorn

Anthologies provide readers with opportunities to learn about varied perspectives on a common theme—diverse approaches stemming from a unifying concept create space for exploration and time to deepen conversations. The 32 chapters in *Somatic-Oriented Therapies* blend Polyvagal Theory principles into body psychotherapy as the contributors discuss research, the science of embodying, and embodied practice. From a personal perspective, it was satisfying to see contributions from colleagues I have learned with and from and written articles with. I know their ethics, skills, and clinical professionalism. And they write well.

In this new collection, Sue Carter offers updated insights on her intensive work with oxytocin, Jennifer Frank Tantia explores a new somatic competency for therapists, and Steven Hoskinson and Bach Ho share their theoretical and clinical understanding of Organic Intelligence and its integration for Post-Trauma Growth. Raja Selvam writes about the practice of embodying emotions, and Aline LaPierra discusses the use of therapeutic touch. Pat Ogden co-authored a chapter with Hanneke Kalisvaart on sensorimotor psychotherapy, Betsy Polatin offers her thoughts about our inherent design and connection to wholeness, and Donnalea Van Vleet Goelz explores somatic communication and trauma work via Continuum Movement. The list of authors I have yet to meet sparked my curiosity, motivating me to immerse myself in the text; reading the chapters added to my literary toolbox as I experienced new ways of integrating Polyvagal Theory into clinical settings. Each chapter is a stand-alone article.

About the Book in General

The book begins with Acknowledgements, followed by a Preface written by co-editor Stephen W. Porges. He shares his transition from scientist to unbiased observer to active participant regarding body-oriented psychotherapies and then in conjunction with trauma work. His Polyvagal Theory instigated a shift from focusing on a specific brand or school to a neurophysiological foundational perspective common to many therapeutic strategies (xv). Porges shares insight into his fledging relationships with Peter Levine, Bessel van der Kolk, and Pat Ogden as they initiated a connection and grew closer together through their curiosity and passion for “understanding the bidirectional communication via the autonomic nervous system of the brain and bodily organs” (xvii). Their work soon eclipsed to include Ed Tronick, Dan Siegel, Norman Doidge, Allan Schore, Diana Fosha, and Louis Cozolino. Their ever-expanding circle of colleagues brought clarity and understanding to the role of the body in trauma. “This book celebrates the important transition within psychotherapy from the constraints of a top-down model to a more accurate view of an integrated nervous system dynamically managing the bidirectional communication between brain and body and between thoughts and feelings” (Porges, xviii).



Co-editors Grassmann and Stupiggia offer a detailed Introduction, sharing their intentions for the book—they are targeting a professional audience clinically immersed in somatic-oriented therapies “as an applied science of embodiment research and treatment” (xxi). The idea for the book was born as Grassmann and Stupiggia discussed their approaches to client work. While trained in different schools of thought, they realized they shared a similar trust in the body. They were relieved to find someone to talk to about how they observed and acted with clients (i.e., their clinical gaze, choice of interventions, and respect for patients’ time and experiences).

They both believed the therapeutic process had to emerge organically; it couldn't be forced. In their minds, "the body was not a means to speed up the therapeutic process or unhinge chronic defenses" (xxvi); instead, it was ground zero—"the constant issue to work on" (xxvi). The body-to-body relationship between therapist and client was paramount.

The book's central message is that therapy will not work unless the client's physiology welcomes and supports the therapist and the interventions (xxv). The chapters in this book emphasize the importance of relational complexity in transforming the client's physiological and emotional regulation—the importance of bodily experience for self-regulation and interaction with others in a social context is crucial (xxi). Therefore, therapists' awareness of their physiological state and clients and the capacity to self and co-regulate are essential tools (xxv).

Research, the Science of Embodying, and Embodied Practice.

Each section introduces new treatment directions and restates well-known methodologies/ approaches. The book aims to develop a more robust framework for future research by examining the scientific rationale for addressing embodiment in quantitative and qualitative research paradigms (xxi). One intention is to reframe psychotherapy—beyond dialogue, memory retrieval, and behavior—to include objective assessments of the client's and therapist's bodily states through reliable metrics, i.e., measuring interoceptive awareness. Conversations about adaptive reactions that may lead to further embodiment, especially in self-agency or autonomy, are included because they are essential in the clinical healing process. Contributor Jacek Kolacz presents his autonomic tracking tool to monitor response to treatment. Sharing measurements of autonomic function with the client turns it into a biofeedback tool.

Robert Schleip writes about the relationship between fascia and emotions, calling fascia the "richest sensory organ of the human body" (pg. xxvii). Writing about nervous system dysregulation as both an intrapersonal and interpersonal experience Arielle Schwartz supports her belief that trauma treatments need to be within a safe and respectful coregulating relationship (pg. xxvi). Ruby Jo Walker and Emily Newcomer share their work using embodiment to approach resilient states without focusing excessively on cognition. Embodying resilient states with deactivation practices helps "train the nervous system to access the ventral vagal complex, leading to the utilization of neuroplasticity for profound change" (pg.xxvi).

Jane Shaw presents SIMPLE Listening, an approach based on “biodynamic craniosacral therapy and other fields that promote physiological safety and regulation” (pg. xxviii). Marlysa Sullivan outlines four processes of mindful movement via a polyvagal lens. Rabih Lahoud and Herbert Grassmann write about the voice as a complex instrument that allows connection, communication, and expression while also mirroring our nervous system. They write, “When the prosody (rhythm, intonation, etc.) of our voice conveys safety, others are drawn to connect with us and listen to us” (xxix).

Looking at trauma from a neuroscientific perspective, the co-editors note that trauma can overwhelm our neuroregulatory capacity, thus permeating our nervous system. Reframing trauma as a biological, behavioral response can transform our understanding of the consequences of traumatic events (xxii). Vittorio Gallese, Francesca Ferroni, and Martina Ardizzi focus their chapter on “early traumatic experiences that influence the typical developmental course of multisensory integration processes, which can damage basic self-awareness, self-esteem, and intersubjective abilities” (xxv). Herbert Grassmann notes that traumatic events attack our senses, so he focuses on our senses’ interoceptive and proprioceptive processing possibilities and the sensory processing of visual reaction patterns.

“From my perspective it has been a very interesting journey observing therapy moving from words, to proximity, to touch, to neural exercises that enhance feedback leading to greater embodiment and awareness, I am truly grateful to have been a part of the collective journey,” Stephen W. Porges

A Brief Closing

Dr. Porges captured the essence of this collection when he shared, *“I think we have all been on a journey to understand what it is to be a human and how we can optimize our experiences. Cognitive and behavioral orientations that have dominated psychology have been lacking in their ability to craft a useful language to describe feelings.”* (Porges, personal communication).

This collection reflects our journey to language our experiences. There’s more than I was able to share in this brief review. Hopefully, my reflections will encapsulate the overall sense of the content, giving readers a look at what they can expect when they order the book. *Somatic-Oriented Therapies: Embodiment, Trauma and Polyvagal Perspectives* will be available on Tuesday, February 4, 2025.

The Editors



Herbert Grassmann, PhD, is chairman of the EABP Research Committee and director of the SKT Institute in Nuremberg, Germany, where he resides.



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Stephen W. Porges, PhD, originator of Polyvagal Theory, is a Distinguished University Scientist and founding director of the Kinsey Institute Traumatic Stress Research Consortium at Indiana University and a professor of psychiatry at the University of North Carolina. He lives in Atlantic Beach, Florida.

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AI From the Body's Perspective

By Jeanne Denney



This year, the conversation about AI has become almost deafening; it arrived on all my devices as a new authority about everything. Meanwhile, my own body is confused by these new relationships that aren't really relationships. Because I'm writing a book on the nature of our core human experience, I felt compelled to share my experience. And no, I did not use AI to write this.

Over the course of this year, I have had any number of arguments with friends about AI. Mostly they are with men. I usually argue that AI excludes much of our innate knowing and predict that it will be disastrous for our natural way of communicating and relating. It is smart but essentially ignorant and soulless compared to our innate intelligence. I point out, "There is no there, *there!*". It is dangerous because it can seem to be so deceptively human, or worse, god-like. "This is too much power." To which my friends usually respond something like: "Don't be a Luddite. You can't stop progress" (which it is assumed this is). Or "Better to learn to work with it than stop it . . . it is just a tool." And lastly . . . there's nothing you can do to stop it anyway." Under these responses, I can sense what feels like a perverse glee, maybe like the false joy of being dominated by something much larger, a "negative pleasure". It creeps me out (mild, visceral disgust).

At least in my world, there is a difference in response by gender. Mostly the folks in these conversations are fascinated, taking it entirely for granted that this is progress that nothing can stop. Make the best of it, etc. It feels like a trance to me. I notice that it puts my own mind/body on alert, as if to threat. I am uneasy; my energy rises in readiness. Meanwhile, most of my female friends shudder or shrug when AI is brought up. They change the subject. They are avoidant, disinterested, and possibly in denial. I find the gender response curious.

I may dislike AI even more than others because I am a poet. That means I am terribly sensitive to language and the spirit within the spoken word. My body has responses to inflections, intonations, pauses, and pace, but even more to the energy of connection and history behind a word. I can still get lathered about the bank machine commanding me to "Have a nice day." Or adopting the personal pronoun "I" or pretending to be sentient or concerned. "How can we help you today?" For me, blessings, concern, or compassion are attached to felt energy that my body understands. Exactly who, I ask, is wishing any good upon me? The answer is always no one, actually. Like plastic flowers, these words on the screen are trying to *remind* me of something beautiful without actually being so. Substituting the false for the real will always, eventually, produce jadedness.

Living words have roots. They pulsate. In our natural state, they result from both body and true feelings. They emanate our shared history with the natural world. To cynically disengage words from any bodily experience, to create bodiless bots expert at the *imitation* of natural speech and seduction . . . I mean *who dreamt this up and why!?* *What substance were they on? Why are we even thinking that this won't manufacture cynicism, disconnection and loneliness?* Meanwhile, evidence that this is a disruptive force to my own mind/body arrives daily, regardless of any good it does. When I sense AI writing in response to my real, lived human words, it shows up as an annoyance and a feeling of betrayal (tightening in the back of my throat, an impulse to make a fist).

I am writing this a month after getting a new housemate at the "SoULL house," where we do training one block from Lake Michigan. My housemate Derek works on a construction project about three miles from my home. This is not just any construction project. Microsoft is investing 3.3 billion dollars in their new AI data center. It will occupy 1400 acres and employ 3,000 men (and a few women) working day and night, potentially using 7 million gallons of water a day. If you need any concrete for a project around here, you are outa luck—all trucks are booked for years. More frightening to me are thousands of large piles being driven into the rich loam of Wisconsin soil where millions of years of trees and animals lived and died, where Mastodons walked, where native populations roamed, sang, danced, and hunted. Later, there were corn and pumpkin fields. Later still, subdivisions with children who played ball, climbed trees, and had scavenger hunts. All of this deep history is gone now. And these piles, buildings and parking lots will be, in some ways, AI's body.

From my house, I can somehow feel the dryness of this construction project and the tragedy of those piles that will never be removed from soil that will never again feel the rain. I shudder. When I describe it to friends, they shudder. It feels entirely like an alien landing on the skin of the earth and attaching itself. My bones feel the heat that will eternally radiate to the ground, a ground made of ancestors of all species, and the separation of it from sky.

Derek must feel this dryness too. He sits at the kitchen table in the evening, exhausted, and exhales in relief to be in a regular, human house. You can feel the dizzying conversations he has been in from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. He is happy to have a place to land. "It feels alive here," he says. That aliveness is the whole point. While his companions flop on air mattresses in empty apartments painted white, he has a bed in a home with a pulse. "They know why they are doing it," he says. The why, of course, is the unnatural volume of money flowing to each one. Money: another unnatural substance that our bodies don't really understand.

AI will be useful. It will solve problems. It may seem magical. But despite the supposed progress, we could remember that our poor bodies have evolved slowly over *millions* of years. They haven't even adjusted to the Industrial Revolution! How will they absorb this new language of inauthenticity and emptiness? And can I bring up the uncomfortable fact that AI is profoundly out of the wisdom of only one gender? Guess which one? I wonder why people can't see that though these piles are root-like, these creations are, essentially, beings with no roots. Giving nothing back to earth or sky, ultimately only taking for the great god—Money—which also has no roots in biological ancientness or embodied experience.



I predict that AI will always serve money and domination schemas, as media and the digital world have, only it will do this on steroids while pretending to be your best friend, wisest counsel, your perfect lover, maybe even God. I predict that AI will incubate a vast dryness, loneliness and a somatic alienation even greater than what we are now experiencing. Because whatever we do to the earth we walk on, we will surely do this to our minds and bodies too, if not now, then eventually. I do not look forward to this dystopian future disembodiment. I see that these experiments in brave new forms of humanity cause us to suffer when we forget our body's evolution or our relationship with nature itself.

Does body psychotherapy have a role in all of this change? I think yes. This field is certainly no stranger to bucking authoritarian regimes. Since its beginning, it has provided a counterpoint to fascism and argued for allowing the natural movement of energy. Reich took many controversial risks to talk about sexual energy and proposed theories of the body in development. He argued for bodily freedom from church and state control of sexuality. But he was also a man of his time, as were his followers. If we are honest, we have to admit that the pioneers we recognize have most often been male physicians, or academics, bringing a European male body perspective only.

As far as I know, Reich and his followers did not talk much about where energy came from or where it was going; he only said that it needed to be unblocked and possibly expelled. He did not talk about how our energy might have discernible patterns, that it might interact with trees, children, bugs, clouds, or any other living thing in some kind of rhythmic pattern that we might pay attention to, or where it goes in death. So even though more than a century has passed in body psychotherapy, there is still little, if any, mention of a natural world or how we are a part of it. None. Isn't that a little strange? One hundred years later, with the sexual revolution behind us, not only is nature under assault, but the female body is as well. We have to notice that though there were women pioneers, women's body-centered perspectives are still mainly excluded from this work. This exclusion brings with it a paucity of needed insight onto the deeper aspects of relationships, community, birth, death and life cycle.

So, we have some work to do. The first thing might be to admit fully that the voice of the female body and the "cradle to grave" somatic insights (traditionally held by women) have been excluded from our canon. To invite them in is to become humble in the face of life itself, to recognize that we are mortal is to engage the natural world, and to honor the feminine body wisdom as deeply as we do the masculine. It takes courage to do this. It takes a willingness to learn from not only the familiar, proud "leader" types but the strange voices on the outer edges. In our time, this work is a vibrant necessity for people of all genders. To defend the feminine within all of us, we must turn toward her and roll out the red carpet. This is a step.

If we can re-conceive ourselves as emphatically and dynamically related to *everything* in our environment and see ourselves primarily as consciousness (rather than an animated material thing) . . . lots of things start to change. Life itself becomes more palpably real. Spirituality becomes part of embodiment. The fact is, we are a necessary and beloved part of our environment. Having a visceral realization of this radically changes our behaviors and priorities and brings resources for mental and physical health. Regulation includes the idea of rhythm, but natural rhythm also includes awareness of aging, death, and dying, not necessarily as trauma, but as *part* of our regulation. Once we do this, we have access to the vast “resource” that most of the rest of the natural uses for regulation: The living, breathing organism that is the earth. And maybe, just maybe, we might stop disrupting this great resource.

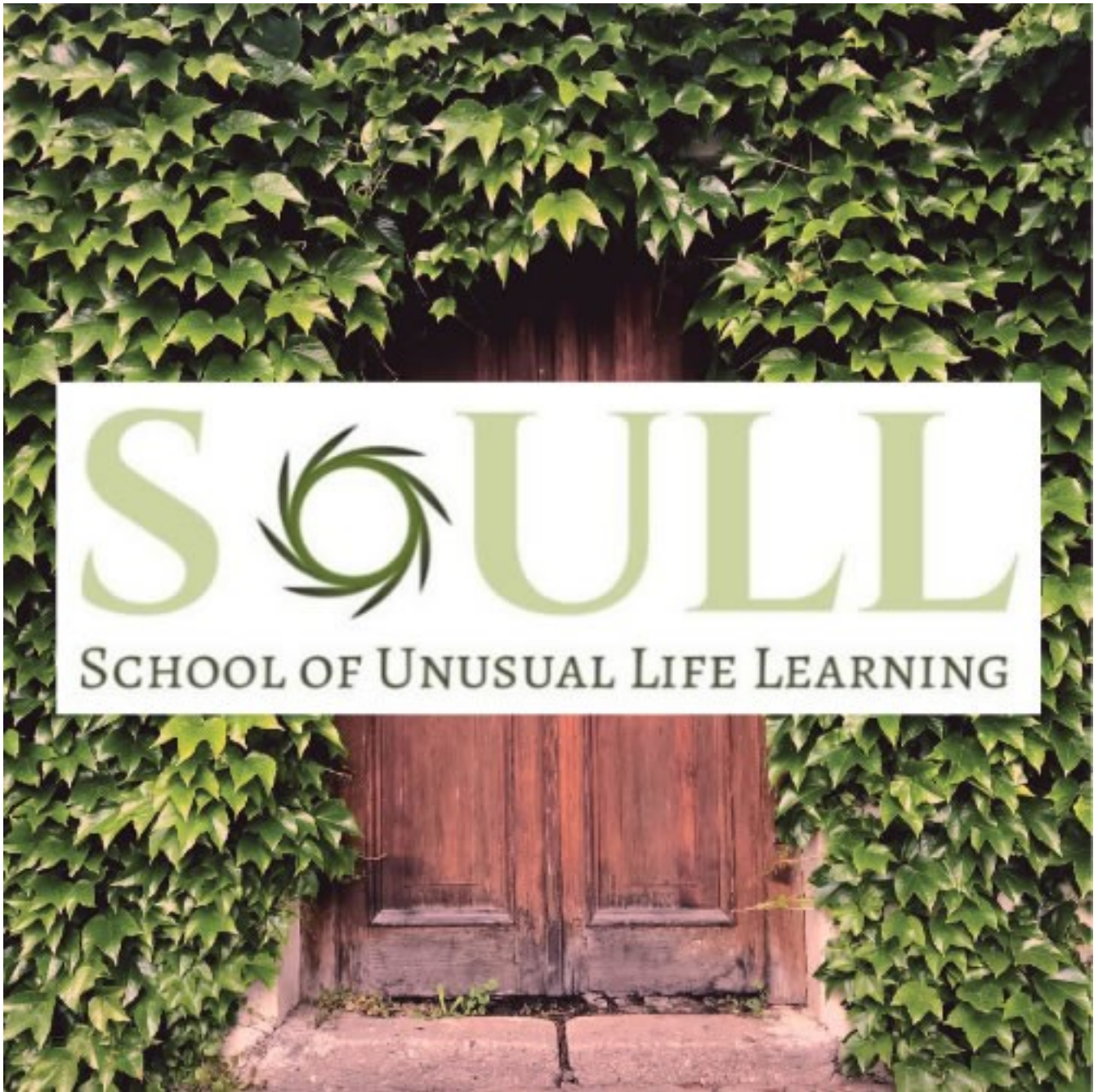
There is a direct connection between our denial of mortality, our denial of the deep feminine awareness of life cycle patterns, and this AI phenomenon. In the face of AI, body psychotherapy is challenged to speak for and sincerely serve the body and its knowing. If we don't, we will feel pain and emptiness we will have no words for. But the body wisdom in our field must be honored and derived from all gender experiences. I hope to offer a step on this path so we can navigate this time with natural intelligence and greater humanity, easily discerning authentic from the inauthentic, the real from the false.

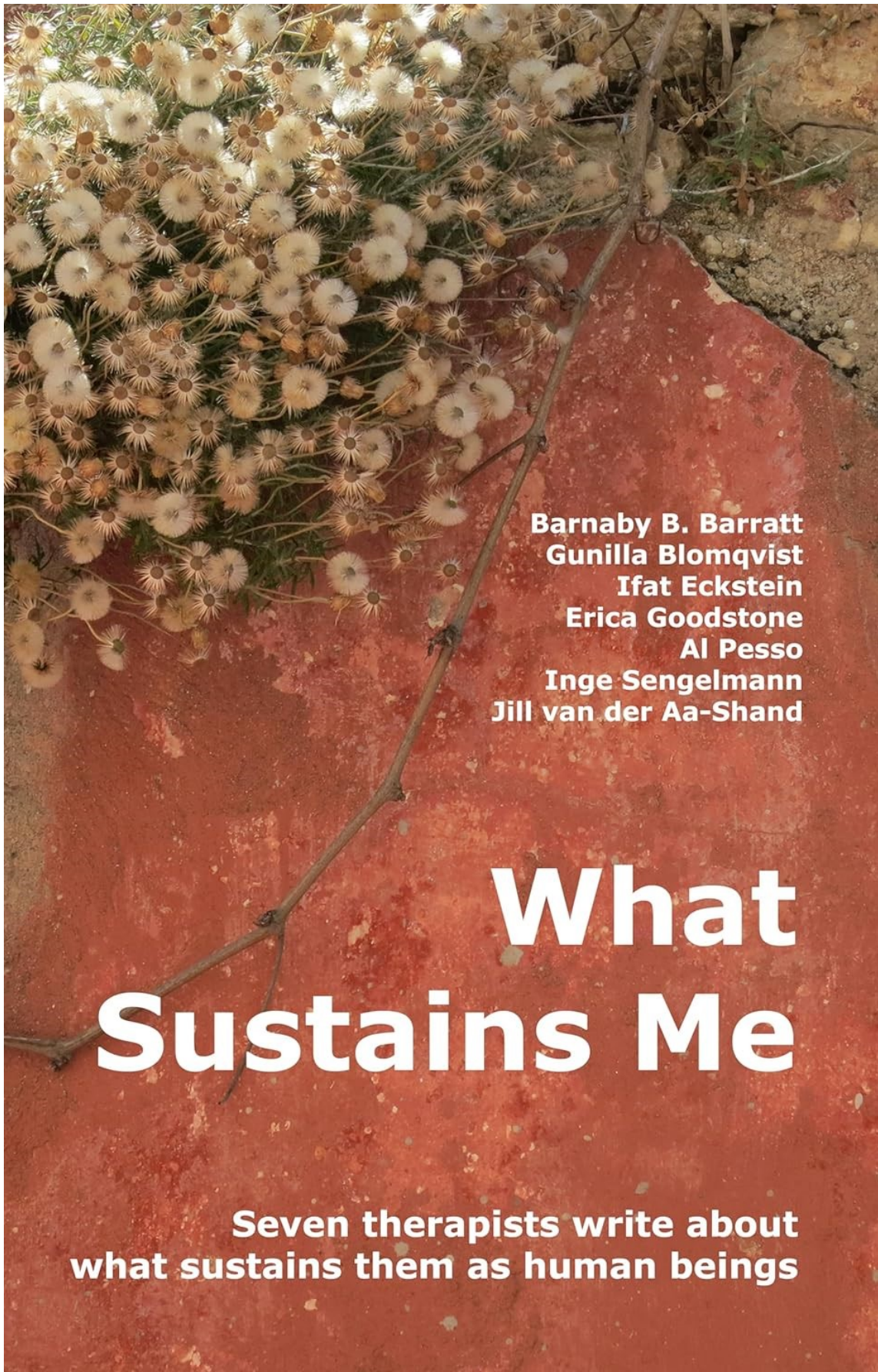
Excerpted from *The Nature of Being Human*. Available December, 2025

Jeanne Denney is a transpersonal and somatic psychotherapist, educator, a hospice worker, healer, author of *The Effects of Compassionate Presence on the Dying*, and founder of the School of Unusual Life Learning (SoULL).

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**Barnaby B. Barratt
Gunilla Blomqvist
Ifat Eckstein
Erica Goodstone
Al Pessa
Inge Sengelmann
Jill van der Aa-Shand**

What Sustains Me

**Seven therapists write about
what sustains them as human beings**

Reviewed by Nancy Eichhorn, Ph.D.

Reviewer's note: The first essay in this collection is a conversation between Serge Prengel and Albert Pesso (1929-2016). I volunteered to edit it for use in this book. There are no financial connections in any shape or form.

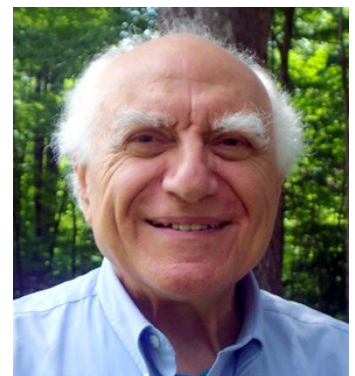
Seven therapists, different as can be but connected by their years as therapists, use their skills for observation and self-reflection to dive into their lives and explore the experiences that brought them to where they are, who they are, and why they are here today. Each shares a deeply personal reflection of self and others, their initial wounds in childhood, and the continual assaults that resulted from self and others. They are vulnerable and intimate. There's a sense of expansion as each writer breathes life into words landing on the page. The stories reached out, touched the essence of my being as experiences resonated with what's happened in my life. Some spoke directly to me; some challenged me to stay present and read through from start to finish to understand their perspectives. It wasn't about simply resonating, not about connecting with what was familiar. It was more about learning from these colleagues who took the time to share their personal essays about themselves and how they make sense of their experiences as unique human beings (Pregel, pg. 5).

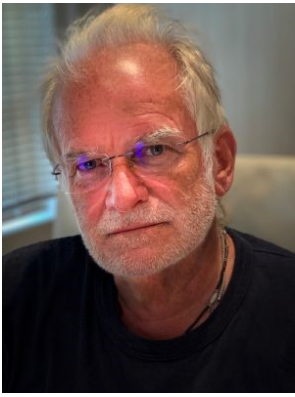


In the Foreword, Serge Prengel explains that the book is an outcome of conversations with therapists about the specifics that give them a sense of meaning and purpose and keeps them going through crises (pg. 5). He is clear that this is not a therapy book or a self-help book; it's simply a collection of personal essays by therapists writing about themselves to perhaps trigger readers to consider what sustains them.

The Contributors

Al Pesso writes about dance and movement, noting that he lived the dance. A sense of meaning and rightness came with motion. Movement is not simply about moving—it comes from our emotional states; it is tethered to our need to get a satisfying response from outside ourselves. He spent years as a professional dancer in New York, and when he left, he experienced seven years of anxiety and panic. Knowing that he could be that miserable for that long and not give up and have his world changed immeasurably sustained him (pg. 11-12). He learned something from the qualities of his misery that had his unborn self in it, which pushed him to create the Pesso Boyden System Psychomotor.



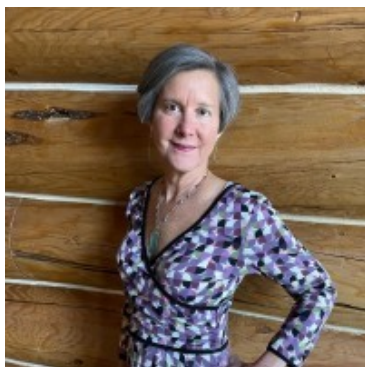
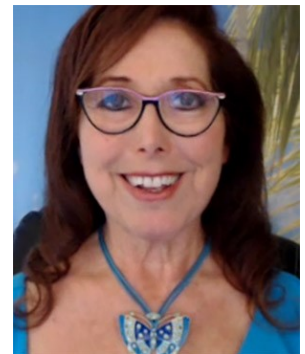


Barnaby B. Barratt poses questions and then muses answers. He looks at the meanings of words such as 'me' (which 'me' are you referring to as there are bundles of entwined versions of me) (pg.21) and what is meant by sustaining the current self as contrasted with the potentiality of who he might become. He writes about healing, his suspicions of one set of definitions, and those he adheres to. A discussion on sexuality comes in, along with his sense of being a 'radical psychoanalyst.' In the end, he concludes that meditation, listening, lovemaking, writing, and dancing sustain him because they help him balance *lieben* (love), *arbeiten* (work), and *spielen* (play).



A scene: A toddler is stuck in a crib with wooden slats. He isn't happy about being in the crib; he wants his freedom. So, he figures out that he can slip his legs through the slats until his feet touch the ground and then drag the crib to a nearby bed. From there, he can climb out of the crib and jump onto the bed. His mother, hearing the commotion, comes into the room, puts him back in the crib, moves it back across the room, and then leaves. The toddler is back at it. He didn't let this current circumstance cramp his style and prevent him from reaching and enjoying his goal, as Erica Goodstone writes. Instead, he took on the challenge and creatively solved the situation.

Her essay on challenges and how they sustained her pulled me in. She was writing about writing, creating, and seeing what's there. She writes, "When the world gets to be too much, I sustain myself by taking on a challenge" (pg. 67). For her, taking on a challenge is "a leap of faith into the unknown." The outcome is more than just an accomplishment; it's about how "each challenge leads her to a continual expansion of the boundaries" of who she is (pg. 68). She invites readers to consider different definitions and impacts of challenges (i.e., roadblocks, difficulties, unwanted setbacks). She offers that having a vision and a shift in one's consciousness—a change in perspective—is required.



Inge Senglemann offers a present tense moment: she, her husband, and her parents sit at the kitchen table. The tension, the palpable feelings, and the bodily responses to the conversation rooted in reflection of past and present are riveting. The reader is in the room feeling what she's feeling with the insight of her ability to weave in observation and reflection.

She writes about her experiences with drug and alcohol abuse, anorexia, and bulimia, wanting to live but trying to kill herself. The push and pull created by a depressed mother and absent father. The loss of innocence early in life and then finding her way to self and body. For her, knowing that the pain of living won't kill her is part of what sustains her. She writes, "instead it will crack open the shell that impedes my connection to the fullness of life, love, compassion, joy and wholeness" . . . and "the double-helix of duality joining into non-duality," this is what sustains her.



The remaining three contributors, Gunilla Blomqvist, Ifat Eckstein, and Jill van der As-Shand (pictured above in order), offer reflections on their lives, the transitions, awakenings, and survival experiences to support their assertion that all of their experiences sustain them.

I read this book long after I received it. I was going through a challenging transition with my mom and death. When I recently picked it up, I thought, why hadn't I read it sooner? Many of the stories struck my childhood chords with a resounding OMG, and YES, that's it! Learning how they traversed less than adequate parenting, the absence of love, the presence of abuse, the wanting, the loneliness, the putting up with, modifying self to mold to other. So many tangents in their stories wove into mine. At times, I felt a release as tension disappeared, as self-acceptance crept back in and chased out self-hatred and disgust. Their willingness to be so real on the page humbled me—my sense of sustaining myself in healthy ways was far from where they were when writing these essays. They faced their adversity and found strength in themselves to grow forward. I think Serge's intention for the book—for readers to consider what sustains them—will come to pass. The essays offer readers much to consider about the authors' lives and, in response, their own.

Serge Prengel, LMHC, is in private practice in New York City. He has been exploring creative approaches to mindfulness in therapy and in everyday life: how to live with an embodied sense of meaning and purpose. He is a graduate of France's Sorbonne University and HEC School. He is certified in Focusing, Core Energetics and Somatic Experiencing, and also draws from Systems-Centered theory. Serge is the editor of the [Active Pause podcast](#) and of the [Focusing Conversations](#) series.