

# Early Experiences as a Biodynamic Massage Therapist

by Vicki Martin

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*The last issue of the journal and discussions at the Spring meeting contained what was, for me, a lot of psychotherapy-ish content. This renewed my frustration that the AHBMT can seem perhaps less relevant to the newly qualified or non-psychotherapist/psychotherapist trainee practitioner – there often seems little talk about bodywork, bodies or energy and more concerning clients' life patterns and events or other, more intellectually oriented content. This (possibly but hopefully not overly long!) article is an attempt to put out there the kind of content I'd like to be reading in the hopes that it may inspire others to write similarly.*

## Background

The history of my practice is as follows. I had worked with a number of volunteer clients on a weekly basis in the spring of 2003, as my massage training at CBPC came to an end, but I subsequently lost these when I took a long break following my father's death at the end of June. I saw my first 'proper' client in September, at the time of writing nearly eleven months ago. Since then, I have seen up to ten clients a week, most at a large GP surgery, 'StowHealth', where I rent a room (there are now around fifteen other complementary therapists), but also at my house and as home visits. *See also the tabulated summary on subsequent pages.*

## On clients

### *New clients*

Having taken a couple of months break from doing any massage at all, I got myself in quite a pickle the night before my first client, to the extent that I ended up seeking telephone support. I was advised to 'imagine myself giving the kind of massage I'd like to receive' in order to 'turn my energy around'. Much as I respected its source, this was a notion which, for one reason or another, seemed at the time neither to make sense nor to be an activity I felt able to engage in (after all, surely I could never give such an amazing massage as I'd like to receive?). I have however subsequently come to recognise the wisdom contained within and therefore warmed to it as

a means of preparing myself for work. As well as the more predictable anxieties, I had a particular concern about working with hands; having held my father's hand as he died not too many weeks previously, I feared what this might bring out in me.

Fortunately, my session with this client was a successful one and I now look forward to new clients without unnecessary anxiety. Maybe everybody feels that their first clients are 'sent just for them', I don't know. Certainly I did. This lady cared for a seriously ill relative as well as having her own health issues to deal with; she tearfully described many of the problems which had occurred in my own family in preceding years, meaning that it was easy for me to give



*StowHealth is the first building in Suffolk with health and social care provision under one roof. Opened in September 2003, it is spacious and the staff are friendly and efficient. A changing exhibition of paintings (which can be purchased) by local artists is displayed in its public areas. For more information see [www.stowhealth.com](http://www.stowhealth.com)*

empathetic and insightful responses and thereby make a good connection. Her emotionality also made her an ideal candidate for packing, a technique I particularly enjoyed giving and which nicely sidestepped the 'hands' issue for me. Other clients 'sent just for me' included someone for whom a key factor was suppressed grief relating to her father's death, a migraine sufferer (the problem which had first taken me to complementary therapies) and a young woman whose life, manner and often negative experiences of talking therapies reminded me very much of myself.

#### *Clients leaving*

My first client responded well after her initial session, experiencing her first pain free week in months, however phoned to cancel on the morning of her third appointment due to an unanticipated and unavoidable change in her circumstances. I have not worked with her since, but we have kept loosely in touch.

Many other clients have come and subsequently left after a handful of sessions for less satisfactory (to me) reasons, if indeed any is given. However much I am told that "one is bound to get some clients like that," I still find someone leaving unexpectedly as destabilising to my confidence. Nevertheless, I am (somewhat regretfully) getting used to it. It's less painful when I can find my own retrospective sense of the underlying reason – for example the young woman who reminded me so much of myself, because my sense is that I would not have been able to receive massage at that stage of my life. Even then, there is still some regret for what might have been.

Another client leaving prematurely was a lady with sleep problems. My initial (unshared) reaction when I heard the longevity of this ailment was along the lines of "well how the hell do I stand any chance of affecting that kind of thing

immediately?" so I was careful not to be too hopeful about prospects for significant change in the short term. To my amazement, at her second visit she reported that she had slept soundly every night, and at her third she told me that she had even been forced to retire early as she was dropping off! This was all the more astonishing in view of the fact that she was anything but a natural massage recipient, finding it difficult to get comfortable on the table and telling me how she was counting the petals of the flowers in the picture on the wall as I worked on her. A few sessions later, still sleeping well, she came without her diary (it was not possible for her to come the same day and time each week) and promised to call to make another appointment, but never did.

I've had quite a number of clients who've pulled off this "I'll call" trick. Calling it a 'trick' probably seems a harsh description; I do appreciate that people find endings awkward, so that this is an easy way out for them. It can feel very unfair though, especially when it involves somebody who has been enthusiastic about or gained relief from my services. Were they lying? My sense is that they generally were not. Am I really so unapproachable that they cannot just be honest about not wishing to continue or about some 'gripe' they might have had with what they were getting? If so, what could I do to be more approachable? There is always room for improvement, but such rapport is possibly only developed over a larger number of sessions. Maybe we got onto a topic which was 'too near the mark'? One client disappeared after they'd talked movingly about the childlessness of their relationship, so this may well have been the case.

If someone 'vanishes' after a fair number of sessions I feel it's quite appropriate for me to contact them as it shows caring, but the fewer times I've seen them the more I doubt whether I should do it and

sometimes in supervision we've decided that I should not. The client mentioned above chatted freely on the phone, reporting that she was sleeping fine and that her life had 'turned itself around'. Of course I'm happy for her, and she was very happy with the result of her sessions, but there is also a part of me that would have liked to have had more time to affect her various aches and pains, to see her continue to open up to me, and maybe witness her starting to actually enjoy receiving touch (something I felt was never too far off for her, in spite of the petal counting).

Experiences with people giving up has helped me to rethink both the way I talk to clients at or before the first session and my own expectations. Many people see complementary therapies (perhaps especially massage as opposed to more medically acknowledged therapies such as osteopathy or acupuncture) as an occasional treat, something to try for a bit, or as a set course of treatments; not as an ongoing relationship. They just want to feel better, and sometimes bodywork can achieve that without all the bodily sensations, images, emotions and psychological insights I might like to be exploring with them in the longer term. And that's OK with me. Short stayers may not be ideal, and I do now more actively promote some of the wider benefits which are potentially available to clients if they come for a longer period, but I've discovered that people who come for only a handful of sessions can hold enough satisfaction for me and that the client can get what they had wanted out of the work in this time. It would be better to finish sessions in a more negotiated and therefore rounded fashion however. I continue to search for ways to foster a more mutually satisfactory outcome whilst appreciating that, as I stress in my talks, massage therapy is not for everybody. To prove the point, one client did call and told me simply

that it was not for her; I was grateful for her honesty.

I probably get more short stayers thanks to my location at a GP surgery, especially in a place described to me by one person as ‘a town on benefits’. Four of my early leavers were also a bit younger than me, all coming with psychological complaints. I think that the fact that I look much younger than I am (a 31 year old client asked my age and was amazed to find that I was 37 as she was certain she was older than me) could have contributed here; I may well have needed someone I believed to be rather older than me in order to feel appropriately supported with more personal issues in my twenties and early thirties.

I have had three clients who made planned departures. These included an appropriate summary of what had gone on and what I feel were the right kind of ‘goodbyes’, so I am very happy about them.

#### *Clients staying*

I’m a sucker for touch, although (as I’ve already hinted) it took me a long time to discover this. I also very easily get attached to therapists or other key figures. My problems when clients leave are undoubtedly exaggerated by these aspects of my personality, however I can find it almost equally problematic when people stay, especially if they seem in any way ‘addicted’, to intentionally use for effect a rather negative term for touch deprivation or an attachment issue. Of course the issue of clients leaving early on may well also partly resolve itself as these contrasting difficulties of mine (fearing or wanting to prevent someone leaving, yet then being incredulous when they stay) become less apparent; they must affect the way I am with clients.

One client came first for a brief chat. She was a lady with a longish

history of panic attacks, sleeplessness and being constantly ‘on the go’, and some minor accidents in recent months which had left her physically less able to do many of the things she was used to doing. Her GP had prescribed ‘tablets for her nerves’ and suggested she come to see me but, over time, it has become obvious that at that stage she had seen herself as, frankly, beyond help. When she arrived for her first massage, a week later, she was in a total stew; she didn’t believe she would be able to lie still for me and had nearly cancelled. When she did, nervously, get onto the table (with some difficulty – I really do need to get myself a step for less mobile clients rather than just pulling up a chair) she however very quickly ‘melted’ and dreamily volunteered that “I never believed I could ever feel like this.” It has been obvious from her responses, including some quite curious baby-

### **Audit of practice clients (1st September 2003 – 31st July 2004)**

age	sessions	fee	problem	GP	status	notes
>55	6 or less	full	physical	no	ongoing	
35-55	7 to 10	full	physical	no	ongoing	
35-55	7 to 10	reduced	physical	no	ongoing	
>55	7 to 10	reduced	both	no	ongoing	
35-55	11 to 30	reduced	psychological	yes	ongoing	
35-55	11 to 30	reduced	physical	yes	ongoing	
>55	11 to 30	reduced	both	yes	ongoing	
>55	6 or less	full	both	yes	“I’ll call”	may well return
>55	6 or less	full	physical	no	“I’ll call”	may well return
>55	7 to 10	full	psychological	no	“I’ll call”	may well return
35-55	6 or less	full	physical	no	“I’ll call”	wants occasional massage only
35-55	6 or less	full	psychological	no	“I’ll call”	came a long way; gave local therapist info
>55	6 or less	full	both	yes	“I’ll call”	suspect got sufficient benefits
35-55	7 to 10	full	both	yes	“I’ll call”	suspect got sufficient benefits
<35	6 or less	full	psychological	no	“I’ll call”	known availability problems (shift work)
<35	6 or less	full	physical	no	“I’ll call”	known childcare problems
<35	6 or less	full	psychological	yes	“I’ll call”	known childcare problems
35-55	7 to 10	reduced	both	no	“I’ll call”	known financial problems
<35	6 or less	reduced	psychological	no	“I’ll call”	suspect found it too provocative
35-55	6 or less	full	physical	yes	“I’ll call”	suspect found it too provocative
35-55	6 or less	full	psychological	yes	decided to stop	“massage not for me”
<35	6 or less	reduced	psychological	yes	decided to stop	financial problems/found it provocative
>55	6 or less	reduced	physical	yes	decided to stop	financial problems/not enough benefit
35-55	6 or less	full	psychological	no	planned end	feeling better
>55	7 to 10	reduced	physical	no	planned end	feeling better
>55	11 to 30	full	both	yes	planned end	feeling better

**Notes:** I suggest new clients commit to six sessions, which explains my groupings for ‘sessions’. ‘Problem’ indicates my evaluation of whether the client would have described their presenting problem as primarily psychological, physical or both. ‘GP’ indicates any GP involvement in the client pursuing complementary therapies. Total clients = 26; age range = 26-87; total sessions = 185.

like wriggling and spontaneous infant-like handholding during the course of a massage, that some early unmet needs are being touched on for her, with the result that she has become more able to receive from others rather than just giving to them, and to recognise her own needs. She does not engage in much talking other than a brief weekly progress update and has specifically told me that she does not want to go into her past, but she has revealed the existence of some significant traumas in her childhood and that she feels these and other life events are somehow being 'got over'. She has indeed got, and is continuing to get, a lot; much more than described here. However, a part of me is quite mystified by how it could possibly be that she does indeed seem to get something even half way approaching that previously elusive 'kind of massage that I'd like to receive myself' – *from me*. On one level I can of course see why she continues to come, yet at another level I am quite stunned that she does – especially knowing that sacrifices are being made for her to have sessions, even at a reduced fee. Whilst I welcome her attachment, it can seem incredible *to me* that *I* should be the object of it. This also applies to a client who said quite genuinely at only our fourth interaction (her second massage) that her week now starts on the day when I see her.

Another person who has been seeing me for a reasonable period of time has not, on the face of it, received such obvious benefits. Most of her spontaneous feedback about my touch emerges if I hit sore spots, or make the symptom with which she occasionally comes slightly more intense. When I ask her about her experience of the massage, she can only offer her stock phrase, "it's very relaxing." For a long time, although I was doing effective bodywork (with improvements in overall levels of tension, flexibility and peristalsis), her symptoms did

not change; from time to time I thought the pattern was starting to shift, but a few weeks later could no longer convince myself. Other inputs and experiences have benefited her (at least her symptoms have changed at times roughly coinciding with them) but what does she perceive *me* to be doing for her? She comes despite conflicting events and symptoms being present at the time of our appointment; is a rather unenthusiastic "it's very relaxing" enough to explain her continued commitment? Of course it could be that she gets more from the massage than she is willing to let on, or that she cannot yet name her experience (both of which I am tactfully probing as possibilities), but, miraculously, it actually seems to be the case that she enjoys and gains benefit from *talking* to me – in fact, I have to confess that she has said as much. The massage is doing its stuff (though I often wonder whether I am doing the right things, in spite of constant reassurance in supervision) but, for this client, having me listen to, and even encourage her to share, her life experiences, especially the frustrations and grievances that she has kept stored up for so long (which are of course being released along with her armouring), has been the main thing that keeps her coming back week after week – in spite of continued symptoms. That, for me, has been annoying ("I'm a massage therapist, not a damned counsellor"), confusing ("Why *me*?") and enlightening ("So *that's* how it can all hook together!"). If the theories hold true, I guess that in time she will start to get more enjoyment – indeed only the other week she volunteered that "the head massage was nice." Hurrah!

#### *The relationship*

So, psychotherapy or massage? With apologies for bringing up this old chestnut again since it has been regurgitated in several recent issues.

The description given emphasises the potential value to the client of 'the talking part', but to my mind

this was not something given all that much attention in terms of either theory or skills-building in the training. I have been a bit shocked (also a little excited, even flattered) at how much encouragement I have been given within supervision about proactively challenging clients to become more self-aware and self-enquiring in a 'psychological' sense. Sure, I expected my clients' lives to be important to my understanding and that I might somehow encourage expression, but I didn't expect to actually work with this type of content in the way I find myself doing. Nor had I, until very recently when it was suggested in supervision, really taken on board the potential therapeutic benefits of talking during the 'hands on' part of a session (the client I've just described usually talks before she gets on the table and remains nearly silent on it).

I feel fortunate that I have other formal/taught and life experiences to support my confidence; a two day coaching course, a neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) practitioner certificate and an aborted introductory counselling course, as well as quite a lot of experience as a counselling or psychotherapy client. I have a difficult relationship with NLP as it can be a rather therapist-dominant, mechanical or even manipulative approach, but it also has many good bits which I find reassuring to have behind me, especially careful attention to the use of language, both in terms of what the client says and what I say.

I've also been helped by books – especially ones on Taoism (which I think sits very well alongside the biodynamic model) and therapeutic relationships [1-7], not so much in terms of giving me specific advice for what to say or not to say, but more in giving me the confidence of having assimilated some different viewpoints about how to be with clients. I may have done quite a lot of psychotherapy and

read a lot of related books, but I still don't have much of an inbuilt sense, based on experience, of how fundamental change occurs through talking, so I can feel a bit of a fraud in that part of my work. My tendency, I know, is to blandly report for the other person's benefit rather than to express things (especially emotionally) for my own; how then can I sense an emotional charge when it is present, and encourage clients to do what I myself fail to achieve? The more I witness my clients' processes, the more things start to fall into place, but I still feel a bit at sea at times, very occasionally even becoming angered that I have been somehow 'hoodwinked' into a career which involves rather more than I had been led to believe and which I do not always feel adequately equipped to deal with.

#### *Sharing information*

How much formal guidance should one give to clients? Is it appropriate to enter into topics such as diet or physical exercise if they are raised by a client – or even advantageous, since one aim, as I see it, is to put a person more in touch with what feels right for them rather than even unintentionally encouraging them to commit to potentially strict 'healthy living' routines?

I have done some training in acupuncture and sometimes interpret symptoms in this light, occasionally offering such insights to clients who seek some form of explanation about symptoms. I do this along the lines of "In Chinese medicine they would say..." and thereby neatly deflect the advice to another source. One client was particularly interested in this; she also implied a lot of anxiety around ageing, illness and death through the way she talked about others, yet would not go near these concerns as they related to herself. I umm-ed and ah-ed for a long time and eventually lent her an introductory, very common sense and easy-to-read

book on healthy living Chinese style [8]. She returned the book after several weeks, saying that she had enjoyed it. We hardly discussed it at all, nevertheless in retrospect the disturbed way in which she had talked largely resolved itself from about that time and in its place has been evidence of a gentle and (I believe) unforced exploration of small dietary changes, shifting attitudes to self-expression and physical activity, and an escalation in her capacity for self-tolerance. So, in this instance, I feel it worked well.

Sharing the wisdoms of other disciplines is one thing; how much to go into biodynamic theory or to reveal about oneself are quite different kettles of fish. I first became interested in Chinese medicine as a result of interactions with an acupuncturist who talked at length with me about underlying theories while we waited for the needles that he had inserted in my body to do their work, but I left his care when it became obvious that poor boundaries (also extending to the sharing of personal information) were negatively affecting my therapeutic experience. I'm therefore especially aware of this risk.

One or two of my clients have become overly focussed on sussing out the theory behind what I'm doing rather than being motivated to be more aware of themselves. Although I'd not want to cut across their impulse to be curious, such fact finding can get in the way, and if I suspect it is then I try not to feed it too enthusiastically. With others it has of course been very helpful to talk generally about vasomotoric cycles or about 'being in your body' versus 'being in your head'. On the personal front, I shared with one client an experience relevant to a distressing event in her life, and immediately felt a disruptive shift in the room. For another client, however, it has been the fact that we are both besotted dog owners which provides a ready 'ice breaker' at certain moments, as

well as giving her permission to reveal a softer side of herself.

If I was doing psychotherapy much (or all) of this book-lending, theorising and personal sharing might well be inappropriate – but I am not. Naturally there are limits, but many different aspects of one's way of being contribute to the establishment of appropriate boundaries and, so far, I am OK with the situation. I certainly wouldn't want to go down the route of a rather cutting "I don't think that's appropriate" (other than as a last resort) as I know how devastating this can be for the recipient; there are other, more artful ways. I remain encouraged and inspired by a later acupuncturist of mine who did lend books, talk about relevant theories and share personal stories without there being any sense of intrusion into the therapist-client relationship. I have learnt and taken on board a lot from the way he conducted sessions, without necessarily wanting to be exactly that way myself.

I am also firmly committed, as I made clear early on in supervision, to giving myself the opportunities to learn from a few minor mistakes (without being reckless) rather than solely being reliant on the guidance of a supervisor. Clients vary, so I don't think there are many specific rules to apply globally; I take an informed but intuitive approach. In my pursuit of a more individually tuned practice, I am also resistant to the notion of establishing a 'patter' (a set way of talking about common topics), preferring to word things as best fits the person I am with and the way I feel.

#### *Thinking versus being*

By now you might be forgiven for believing that I must be in constant dilemma with my clients, with this endless self-dialogue going on about whether I should or should not do or say particular things, how I should respond, whether I'm doing right or wrong etc.

This is, for the most part,

absolutely not the case. One of my greatest joys about working as a biodynamic massage therapist is that it has provided me with a means of being with people in a very simple and enjoyable way. This is, for me, quite a revelation and a new and delightful experience. I feel natural and unforced, unhampered by intrusive thoughts. Present. It is only later that I start wondering whether I could have done things differently or trying to work out what was going on and, thankfully, the most invasive form of this tendency (the two-o'clock-in-the-morning-and-can't-sleep-because-of-it kind) is decreasing.

Many authorities stress the value of just 'being' [5, 9]. The idea that the benefits of my own discovery might rub off on clients adds a little bit of magic to the mix which I like. Rest assured that I don't sit there like a meditating guru; I do respond and if there is an infrequent hint of an awkward silence I don't perceive any real benefit in suffering it out (nor do I want to). It is not just a relief that it is unnecessary for me to be totally on the ball, perceptive and problem fixing at all times (the way my former veterinary training might have required me to be as a practitioner), I now believe that to be that way might be counter-productive. At vet school, back in 1990, a kindly professor once suggested that we give ourselves the chance to stop a while and just enjoy the animals we were dealing with (at the time, sheep). What effect this had on the sheep who knows, but it is a piece of advice which has stuck with me.

My more recent move towards talking with clients more than I had been while they are on the table has, alas, started to detract from my sense of 'presence' during sessions, which of course explains much of my disinclination to doing so. This suggested change in my practice continues to be a bit of an unwelcome and resistance-evoking 'issue' for me, not least because it

does not match up with my experience of beneficial effects as a recipient of biodynamic massage – in which remaining silent and staying with myself/my body has seemingly reaped the larger rewards.

## On doing massage

### *Techniques*

Does one decide which techniques will be appropriate during the initial spoken exchange, or wait until one's hands are on the client? I very rarely decide beforehand although I often wonder if it would be good practice to consider it a bit more than I do. At a largely unconscious level I probably do rule out certain techniques, or at least put them further down a list of possibilities, before getting a client on the table.

After a few months in practice, I went through a stage of being very uncertain about what I should do. I'd get my hands on clients and be drawn to a few possibilities, but feel uncertain about them – not wanting absolute certainty but a better sense of conviction that I was doing the right thing. Maybe this was just my head getting in the way (usually I just let my hands follow their instincts, and this works well) but it meant that I might set off on a

certain path only for it to feel wrong and then divert down a more 'comfortable' route.

When this pattern persisted, I consulted my course notes for a mental refresher on technique usage, which definitely helped; hands and head were more in agreement. More recently I've received suggestions in supervision as regards techniques for specific clients which have taken me back to my files again; this has led to useful discussions, especially where discrepancies exist between my notes and my supervisor's viewpoint regarding the appropriate use of a particular technique.

I'm often aware that what I do seems more influenced by my experiences of massage within biodynamic psychotherapy than by experiences on the course, although I must also have embodied an understanding of techniques from the training which has an unconscious influence. I would find it much harder to work confidently with clients and I'd be far less inquisitive about what I do or how I might further develop my skills if I had not had received so extensively from an experienced practitioner – to the extent that I wonder how I would manage to practice without it (and am curious how those without do).



*The waiting area of the auspiciously titled 'private consulting suite'.*

Conversely, does my experience within psychotherapy give me access to sources of inspiration which might be less appropriate within biodynamic massage therapy, especially from less experienced hands? I don't know.

### *Bodies*

I knew I had a few residual issues about bodies as I left the training, and others have cropped up.

Bellies and especially chests were areas I backed off from initially. I remember my shock when, in a teaching demonstration of deep draining, the sheet was pulled back and a female student's chest was exposed; this has left quite an imprint. Having discussed it, I don't think anyone else in the group felt so strongly, however. I have had most of my massage clothed (my therapist's apparent preference) and if a client chooses to remain clothed with me then these areas are less scary to work on; when female clients choose to undress I usually give them the choice between my working through the sheet, using a towel or item of clothing to cover their breasts or simply pulling back the covers, rather than just exposing both the client's and my own vulnerabilities. It has been suggested to me that, as therapist, one misses too much information working through clothes, and that one should not hint that there is anything wrong with bodies, so that clients should be encouraged to undress, even if this requires a challenge to their values. I find it quite satisfactory working through clothes, and I don't want to put pressure on my clients which might lead to them feeling uncomfortable (especially early on in our relationship), so my policy is to allow the client free choice.

The medial aspects of the buttocks and the inner thigh are other 'biggies'. I know from experience that it can be really nice to be worked on here. To have people stop and ask me whether it's

OK to go to these areas beforehand can make for a quite stilted and artificial experience, with something getting lost – yet this is often the advice given. I take an approach based on the individual client.

One client had feet which really, really stank. It was very awkward for me to know how to deal with this; how much of the smell would stay on my hands during the progression from legs to arms to head (and thus to his nose)? Should I stop and wash my hands? I didn't (though I did raise them close to my nose before I touched his head just to check it out) but I would probably now be a bit braver and mention it, suggesting they either come with a fresh pair of socks or that I might use the washbasin part way through.

How much should one feed back to a client about one's sense of their body? Talking to one person about her armouring (without actually using this term) led to a rather awkward moment when we drifted onto the notion that she was emotionally restricted – something she was not too happy to hear and I rather wished I'd bitten my tongue. Several weeks later she however came back to this topic of her own accord and volunteered that the observation had some truth in it. We then had a very useful exchange which has led to her productively bringing more of her 'moans' (something she habitually resisted on the basis that a relative moaned all the time). Pointing out another person's extremely stiff neck and my near-inability to move her head at all during lifting, together with the possible interpretation that she might find it hard to let go of her head not only physically but in the way she lived her life, was also an insight which I believe 'sold' the therapy to an initially dubious client.

### *An energetic experience?*

I enjoyed the massages I got from other students on the training, but these experiences were a world apart from those I've had when massaged

by my therapist. Why is this? How can I 'do it like she does'? For example, how is it that when she uses lifting on my arms it feels like each movement is hooked up to and somehow magnified within every cell in my torso, a bit like the tide rising and falling inside me and apparently taking over my breathing pattern – as opposed to the only occasional and comparatively innocuous need to take a deeper breath that I experienced from fellow trainees? And how is it that an apparently non-moving hand contact can be so reliably provocative, 'going right through me', contrasted with moments when a trainee's hand felt only a little more affecting than the sensation of my trousers on my leg as I type this text? Is this a function of me (certainly when I am more withdrawn, I feel less), of the therapist's actions, of the therapist herself (her energy?) or of our relationship (which presumably affects both our energies) or some or all of these?

Such questions, or perhaps more honestly the possible deficiencies which their answers might highlight in myself and enable me to work on, continue to fox me. This is in spite of the memory of Gill Westland suggesting that, with some clients, one deeper breath may be all you are likely to evoke during a session (if anything at all) and other people pointing out that a lot of the differences in my experience are simply down to how long whoever is working on me has been doing biodynamic massage.

How am I doing in this regard? Two of my longer standing clients seem to have very different experiences. One responds very little; I almost put up an internal cheer on the rare occasions when she sighed or commented that "I felt that go down my arms" (about a month after the latter, her normally hypotonic arms developed much more tone, and she started to report taking more choices and control of her life). The other is quite affected

by her energy movements in terms of her breathing, her awareness of activity in her belly and her conscious state, even if she does not describe too much in the way of streaming or other energetic sensations. Several clients have said things like “I felt that in my throat when you were working on my foot” (thankfully they don’t often ask for an explanation of this as I usually feel I am somewhat unconvincing when I try to explain it, even using my knowledge of acupuncture meridians) and others have described ‘tinglings’ or warmth or a feeling that ‘something has started flowing which wasn’t before’. I know that the client’s description of their experience is not the be all and end all, but these reports do suggest that it’s not too dull for them!

One area which I feel is weak in my work is when I aim to work on the ‘up’ side of the vasomotoric cycle, especially in increasing the pace of what I do, for clients who need to have ‘a bit more up’ before they can ‘come down the other side’. A client with a history of a specific traumatic event which seems to be behind her panic attacks comes to mind; she needs it, as we’ve discussed in supervision, but I find it quite hard to do. The ‘nice head massage’ which I have already mentioned was one in which I upped the pace, hence my sense that it is so relevant to the client’s felt experience.

The idea of doing practice sessions or swaps in order to get feedback often appeals, but experiences with acquaintances who have reacted adversely (one spent nearly a week in bed after a massage) or where the relationship got too blurred have put me off. At school I used to find practical exercises rather uninspiring; they were too artificial, not ‘real’ enough, merely like a ‘rehearsal’ or ‘staged replay’. The same level of enthusiasm can apply to working on someone who is not a ‘real’

client. I also get very enjoyable massage already in psychotherapy, so don’t really have much inclination to have someone else’s hands on me as would be required for a swap session.

#### *Preparation*

One way I know I can improve my work is through effective preparation. On some days I am better able to prepare myself beforehand than others, not for lack of time but because I just seem unable to get into the right kind of state.

It has been suggested to me that I might beneficially open up my energy by doing Tai Chi or Qi Gong exercises, but unfortunately these are often too provocative for me and I don’t usually risk them just before a session. I do them at home however (also meditation) and know that when I have been consistently able over a few days to experience my body as less restricted and my mind as less chattering in these practices then I pick up more information about my clients while I’m working on them, and they respond more.

Before sessions, I consciously use my long drive to the practice as preparation in whatever way feels right – be that quietly focussing internally, belting out Robbie Williams songs, giving my mind the opportunity to exhaust itself on some current issue, or mindfully observing the passing countryside. I also try to give myself at least ten minutes prior to my first session lying on the massage table, using the feedback of the stethoscope’s loudspeaker to help me settle and connect with myself. A generally more responsive client to start the day off also helps. I have to say that I’ve never really gone in for the practice of rubbing one’s hands together to sensitise them; this seems counterproductive as it just makes my fingers and palms distractingly tingly.

Once, after a particularly turbulent few days on a personal level, none

of my usual routines worked and I spent probably the first third of a massage more finding myself than focussing on the client. This felt (and still feels) OK; the only alternatives would have been to cancel the session at short notice or to just ‘go through the motions’ of doing a massage for the entire duration. Thankfully I didn’t panic about it and, as a result, the client did eventually get some good work.

#### *Good work*

What actually constitutes ‘good work’ though? In spite of my totally unrealistic desire to get my clients happily sighing, breathing deeply and expressing amazement at all these wonderful sensations I’m giving them, I don’t of course judge ‘good work’ chiefly by a client’s verbal feedback, other more obvious responses or by how much their symptoms improve (since such improvements may fluctuate or take a while) though all these are important. It’s more to do with subtler things like what and how much I pick up about the client as I work, how well I feel I respond to this information, the quality of contact I am able to make, and how their body and manner changes over time, especially whether they become in some way ‘more alive’ (the phrase which I chose for my web site address: [www.morealive.co.uk](http://www.morealive.co.uk)).

Let’s look at these aspects of ‘good work’ in turn. Everybody picks up things in different ways. For me, sometimes there’s an internal sense that something may be ready to shift and that it’s worth persevering, or that something is shifting or has shifted so that I can move on. Sometimes I pick up sensations of warmth or coldness (not as skin temperature, but more energetically). Sometimes I feel the client’s body saying ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to me, or that what I’m doing is appropriate or less so. Sometimes I get images – and then I may wonder how much to put in my notes; how would a client respond if they were





*Consulting room 4 – ‘my room’ on Tuesdays – kitted out for biodynamic massage; the practice provides only a rather horrible examination table (as seen back right) so I take my own Earthlite with me.*

to ask to read them and find I had described them as ‘like a beached whale’? I’ve also experienced all manner of weird sensations which can’t be so neatly categorised; for instance a severe feeling of compression and subsequent release within my head, or an amazingly strong static charge which was accompanied by blue sparks flying across my field of vision (these occurred while working on heads).

One striking example which affected my response happened when I worked with a client who had chronic fatigue. I had a sense of sheets of ice which had for a long time been solid but had just cracked; there was a risk that, were I not extremely careful, a dangerous current from the previously unmoving, dark and quite stagnant, water underneath might gush forth, or that the entire structure might somehow collapse. Letting this inform my hands by taking what felt like appropriate care (I was packing at the time) and remaining in contact with the image for feedback, for me, constitutes ‘good work’ (I guess as long as the client does not complain or otherwise react adversely, but I don’t think one has). So would be my working matter-of-factly on a client who I sense does not feel safe enough to accept very much contact, in spite of assurances that she feels comfortable, relaxed and happy, and enjoys a massage ‘going deep’.

Picking up and responding to these things may mean that I am receiving the client well; but what about their receiving me, since that is presumably what I need in order to have much effect on their energy and if they are to really *feel* the massage – some other components of ‘good work’?

One of the benefits of my pre-massage routine is, one assumes, that it relaxes me and expands my aura, making me more present in a way which helps me to pick up things, but also more present for the client, in a (hopefully) spacious and non-threatening way; I guess this constitutes one aspect of making a connection.

How much a client lets me affect them (how well they receive me) will of course also depend a lot on their ability to form relationships (most especially with me), their current ability to receive touch and their level of comfort with their own inner movements – which all links up with their developmental and more recent history. Nonetheless, I like to believe that it should be possible to encourage the relaxing of any difficulties in these areas through the way our bodies talk to one another (principally during the bodywork phase of the session), and that this will then cross over into their everyday life – rather than just relying on how well we connect when face to face (although this of course contributes strongly).

How does one go about achieving a useful connection with a client through touch? My training in zero balancing (ZB) helps (a form of bodywork in which students are formally taught how to touch in a way which is safe and which connects with a client’s structure and energy so that the contact achieved ‘goes deep’ [10]), as does life experience and my ever-increasing experience of doing massage, but I’ve got a lot of insights from other sources. Here is not the time and place to share these (I don’t think I’m ready to go public with my theories) but things like playing around with ZB touch exercises in slightly different ways, and inspiration taken from homoeopathy, NLP, acupuncture, craniosacral therapy and spiritual healing have been helpful.

My response to a client is usually that of ‘informed intuition’ but, as I’ve already stated, my head and my hands can disagree. For example, a client with headaches. Sure (my head says), I need to work on the tense scalp, stiff neck and rigid shoulders, but there is also very little peristalsis and Peg Nunneley seems to use energy distribution almost exclusively in her accounts of the successful treatment of migraine clients [11]. There again, what about my client’s very tense flanks and tensor fascia lata – location of the Gall Bladder meridian, the treatment of which in acupuncture is often implicated for

such cases? Also, where is she, right now, in her vasomotoric cycle? By this stage, my hands are feeling a bit left out; it can take a while for them to find the space in which to have a say and just 'do their stuff'. However, it all comes together somehow and the mixture of approaches adds to the variety of experience for the client; in the end, the proof of the pudding is whether we make progress with the observed 'deficits' and (as before) whether the client becomes 'more alive'.

My response also, of course, requires timing as well as an appropriate level of connection and technique. How to 'catch the inbreath', as was suggested on the training, can still prove quite a challenge. Being still can also be challenging; whatever it is which makes me want to put my hands in two different places and keep them there, and whatever makes me then move them on somewhere else I don't know, but I'm equally sure it does something inexplicably useful, so I trust it. It is when I reflect on things like this that I long to have more of a felt sense of energy – not just an impression or image which might merely be my interpretation. A chilly/cloudy day might be great for someone with sunburn, but not so good for an ice-cream seller; how reliable are my responses to what I pick up when they are not based purely on my actually *feeling* a client's energy?

I find it fascinating how clients' bodies change over time. The most notable was a man who solely wanted help with some finger numbness. My first impressions of working on him were striking enough; the affected arm felt withered and dead, with highly tense muscles along the medial aspect distal to the elbow, and the shoulder was, as he himself put it when I asked for feedback during the massage, "somehow not very alive." This contrasted strongly with the other side, which seemed huge and steely, like a giant's.

These impressions largely subsided over the first three treatments, during which my response to each side was, whilst not completely different, appropriately unique. At the fifth session, he reported having experienced symptoms in the past few days which he feared were a relapse of a potentially serious condition he had been diagnosed with some months previously, but which had been in remission. These symptoms were ones which he had not had, but according to textbooks should have had, at first diagnosis; had the massage somehow encouraged their expression, like a suppressed emotion? His body felt like a tube of toothpaste which had been squeezed hard up to the top (his head), where the lid was remaining tightly on; his lower legs and feet were as solid and inflexible as a gnarled and twisted piece of driftwood. I responded in the way my hands felt appropriate, totally intuitively, and by the next session things were back to a more balanced state; we never got to know whether it was a medically confirmed relapse as tests could not be completed, for technical reasons. Between sessions, the finger numbness (which had been static for several months) fluctuated widely between being nearly completely absent to being only a bit better than when we started; the massage had some effect but not a consistent one, although the situation was better at the end than at the start and has, I gather, continued to improve since. His chronic sinusitis (which felt to me like a layer of goeey putty both under the skin and pervading the skull) however pretty much vanished, his weak wrists (there had definitely been a block there) became stronger – neither of which he remembered to mention until he noticed they had disappeared – and he received other more wide ranging benefits in overall 'well-being'. We had less than ten sessions together, the last I believe more because he

wanted it than felt he needed it (which is of course absolutely fine with me) but it was a stimulating series from my point of view.

I often ponder how much the client's enjoyment of their felt experience really matters with respect to this 'good work' issue. For truly holistic work which has a high level of satisfaction for me, it does very much so; Boyesen writes of the secondary personality having lost touch with their life force [12]. On a less esoteric level, if we want people to get back to the wisdom of their bodies then they need to be able to feel them, and if that can be experienced as pleasurable then their bodily sensations are more likely to influence them more significantly. So, a felt sense of enjoyment is important *conceptually*.

But *in reality, is it necessarily as important to clients as we feel it is for them?* Someone whose symptoms responded very well seemed to feel relatively little. How much did she enjoy the massage? I'm not really sure; my sense is that she was more puzzled by the whole thing, though she did utter the "it's very relaxing" phrase once or twice. I felt a lot about her, however – her body felt as full of unwanted material (if you like, as full of shit) as was her life, and I responded to that, and enjoyed working with her. The ability to consciously feel and enjoy is maybe more vital for the practitioner in some instances. How far the client travels down the route of feeling and enjoying will vary depending on where they start out from, and the type of journeying they wish to undertake; as a therapist one might wish that everyone travels a long way with you, but this is probably not a reasonable expectation.

The inspiring books of Daniel Santos [13,14], which one reviewer suggested should be required reading at every massage school, have relaxation as key in the early steps of an intriguing model of healing that is not (as I see it)

incompatible with biodynamic theory. He stresses that healing is not a one-off achievement but a reconnection with one's process (a word I had many problems with until I read his books) and with spirit – nicely hooking up with Clover Southwell's talk of soul at the 2002 AHBMT AGM [15]. (If the different terminology confuses you, another book I find useful, on chakras and written by a therapist with a training in bioenergetics [16], describes spirit and soul as at the ends of a single continuum, spirit being the universal aspect of soul and soul the individual aspect of spirit). Perhaps the "it's very relaxing" response of certain clients is enough; that we just take them a bit closer, that we somehow 'open the door' to enable something new to rise into their awareness, perhaps of a journey which they can continue their exploration of later?

#### *Looking at bodies*

For some time, one of my favourite pastimes after an acupuncture session (not exactly one of which my acupuncturist might approve due to its caffeine and dairy content) was to go for a mocha coffee with cream in Starbucks, sit in the window and watch people going by. I discovered that I could get quite a sense about bodies that way – even before my massage training – but I wasn't quite sure what I was detecting (a sense of what it might be like to be in their body?). As I progressed through the massage course, I tried to include a more formal reading of bodies (as described by Dychtwald or Kurtz and Pretera [17,18], including character structures, while I was watching the shoppers, but I found this rather harder as there was not time to look in detail; people were moving and I often only saw them from one angle.

I am only now beginning to incorporate my 'Starbucks skills' into my practice. Body reading and

character structures have nearly always entered into supervision discussions, and from time to time I go back to my books to revise them, but I haven't really taken this information into massages in a conscious way. I've recently started to look at clients in the simple way I first had done over my coffee, and to let this influence my hands. With some people, for example someone whose shoulders look somehow as frozen and solid as a rugby player's shoulders even though physically they are actually not that huge or obviously restricted (which presumably might represent connective tissue rather than muscular armouring), it has come very naturally and been very useful. With other clients it has been helpful to have a more disciplined curiosity to get me to really *look*.

Generally speaking, the more I explore different modes of accessing clients, the more I pick up and the more it informs my massage and makes me really think about the theories I have been taught as they apply to living people. Sometimes, however, confidence wanes and I wonder whether, having seen something, I might be starting to imagine things through my hands in order to make everything fit together.

#### *Stethoscopes and intention*

Note that I didn't include peristalsis in my list of things making up 'good work'. At the moment I've largely abandoned my stethoscope, although a few clients have resisted this to the extent that it's been better to keep using it; my initial explanation of what I do must have been sufficiently strong on my 'gizmo' (as I call it) that they feel cheated or somehow not treated properly if I don't use it.

I often feel that the stethoscope just tells me what I already know (the sounds seem to come predictably) so at times it seems merely confirmatory and therefore unnecessary, but more

importantly I've become aware that it can actually be undesirable and untherapeutic. Someone once suggested that a stethoscope can get between you and the client, and I think that's true; certain of my clients have been much more open and accessible when I don't have earphones on (even though I use small in-the-ear ones which are less obvious), and I have been freed from the tendency to be overly focussed on what I am hearing and therefore to push for more or better sounds, or to react in another unhelpful way if there is little to hear. Certain clients, from whom I never heard much peristalsis, I now notice responding in all sorts of other ways, and I get the impression (and, from one client, the verbal feedback) that there are more audible borborygmi as well. Neither my therapist nor my supervisor use a stethoscope, which is of course influential. The fact that I am totally deaf in one ear also affects my relationship with stethoscopes, as I cannot wear earphones on only one ear and still have another available for interactions with the client; I also don't agree with the practice of playing peristaltic sounds through the loudspeaker with clients.

In ZB there is no intent for the client to respond a certain way (whatever happens just happens) and a lot of emphasis on accessing one's 'witness state' (watchful, with soft eyes, non-judgementally and non-analytically; just being curious). Initially, for me, this made the level of connection with the client seem less strong than it is in biodynamic massage, however my viewpoint has shifted on this and I now think there are useful lessons to be had.

Working without a stethoscope has opened my awareness to other forms of response from the client – the full range of 'working signs', as they are known in ZB. It makes me less involved with just the part of the body I'm working on, and thus more holistic in my approach. The witness state enhances this;

maintaining a wider awareness of peripheral vision, just noticing what is going on and what I am doing in a non-critical way. ('Witness' is also an alternative name used for 'spirit' by Santos and other authors [13,14,19].) Yet there is also space for focus and intent within this state; in ZB I've heard talk of, for example, 'going for the shoulder' when you apply traction on the feet, and this is an idea I've engaged with on occasion in massage sessions. For example, I might be use lifting on the arm but simultaneously have an intention to affect an area of restriction between the shoulder blades, or to affect the belly in order to facilitate peristalsis. I haven't much of a clue how it works, but it seems to, and I continue to experiment with it, without being unhelpfully demanding.

## **On supervision**

It took me a long time to really have any sense of how best to go about supervision. I knew what it was for in theory, but even now I still struggle with what to talk about and how best to describe clients – what to bring, what to omit – in order to gain most beneficially from it.

### *Stories versus bodies*

It is especially easy to get caught up in 'stories' (the client's present life and past history) rather than talking about bodies or the actual bodywork itself (beyond mention of the techniques used), even though these are the things I most want to develop my awareness of. Indeed, it could perhaps be said that to some extent I have been guilty of 'storytelling' within this article. A focus on 'storyline' added to my previously mentioned concerns as regards whether I am really helping clients more through our conversations or through the bodywork, and led to my losing some of my sensitivity – which I found quite disappointing and frustrating. Getting a more

satisfactory balance has definitely enhanced my work; talking about bodies has in particular led to me starting to get a better understanding of the *bodily* aspects of a massage process, and of the *inter-relationship between bodies and 'stories'* (or, as my supervisor puts it, *how the story can come out of the body*). The tendency is otherwise to work with a client and be aware of how their symptoms and life change without really paying attention to associated trends in their body (and energy), which is what I feel I should, as a massage therapist, be aware of and able to work with.

### *Space for me*

Another balance to get right has been that between talking about specific clients versus general issues and my experiences as a massage therapist. My natural tendency here is to arrive knowing which clients I've seen and to simply run through the list from the most needy of attention to least until time runs out, yet probably the most valuable and memorable discussions I have in supervision are those about less client-focussed issues. Committing to weekly supervision even when I have only seen a small handful of clients has been very worthwhile in this respect.

## **On running a business**

I have been self employed for some years, so running a business has not been a hurdle for me.

However, the issue of fees has been; not so much setting a target fee – I don't have a problem with the concept of charging for my services – but sticking to it, especially when I have been seeing a client for a while and they say that they cannot afford to continue weekly (or at all). I want experience, I need to build a name for myself, and fortunately I'm not that strapped for cash, so it is worth being flexible. Am I however lessening the value of what I do by

reducing my rate? And, since the relationship is so important, am I setting the stage for resentment getting in the way because of the low fee I am receiving? All aspects of this debate ring true at different times and it continues to be an uncertain area.

Cancellation fees are even more problematic; I have to take my own payment at the surgery and so can't leave it to some poor receptionist to confront clients. I don't like the idea of charging people for nothing, but am also irritated by late cancellations, especially when I still have to pay for the room. I have formulated a policy I'm happy with, but still tend to bend the rules.

I've avoided a formal sheet of terms and conditions but I do find the whole issue of verbal contracts particularly difficult. The need to take them seriously has been emphasised to me by an experience with a client whose tendencies towards a victim mentality had already been suggested within supervision. At the start of her seventh session, after a traumatic life event and a change in her financial circumstances which had led to her cancelling her sixth session and my subsequently offering her a lower fee but not, unfortunately, tying this into an agreed extension in terms of number of sessions, she avoided my attempts to set a date for a subsequent appointment on the basis of not being able to afford it. Right at the end of the hour she launched into an outburst about the hopelessness of her situation, also saying how much she got from my work (which was already extremely obvious) and then made a rapid exit. Money is often as long as a piece of string and people will find it if they value something enough; it may have made no difference in this case, but I still regret not having set up an agreement for ongoing sessions which might have prevented this experience.

### *Self-promotion*

I am having my second brochure printed and have incorporated several changes into it. I have already mentioned clients coming for a while and then stopping, but others expect only to come at irregular and infrequent intervals. To discourage this I have put more weight on the regular and ongoing nature of biodynamic massage, likening it to getting physically fit or learning a new language (you wouldn't expect to achieve much progress with either if you only did it a few times or once a month). I have also put less emphasis on emotional issues (especially after an internal memo to GPs, based on a read-through of my brochure, described what I did as 'psychotherapy with massage, good for anxiety and depression') and I have made a few other edits to reflect the ways in which my approach to clients is developing.

Distribution of leaflets can be a problem; my local Cambridgeshire library tells me they will only display charity ones. Suffolk charge nearly £80 to distribute leaflets to chosen libraries, even if you only want them in one; initially this seemed expensive until I realised how long it would otherwise take me to distribute them myself. I will soon be attempting to get my brochures into local GP surgeries.

Many forms of information are available on my web site, but to date I have only had one client from this source (plus another who never turned up for the appointment), and other clients have never mentioned having looked at it. I have however only recently negotiated links from local sites and advertising on regional therapy directories. I resisted Google's 'ad links' based on some of the ones which inevitably come up if you search for 'massage' and the local nature of my business, although I gather it was a good move for a local acupuncturist.

I took a half page ad in my local free press earlier this year (around

£200), which brought in three clients; one of these stopped sessions early on but the other two have more than paid for the advert. I am now taking smaller ads, but the problem is what to put in them; so few people have heard of biodynamic massage that I feel a little explanation is required to get people to phone or visit my web site. The value of 'getting one's name out there' is of course hard to measure, whether or not ads bring in clients straight away.

I enjoy doing talks but haven't done more than a handful. The fifteen-to-twenty minute one I gave to the GPs was met with very good feedback and much enthusiasm however appeared to result in a complete cessation in any formal recommendations being made for people to come to see me (not that I was getting all that many, and I believe therapist recommendations generally dwindled at around that time). In retrospect I would have done a few things differently; for example, was it asking for disaster to have a whole slide on the risk of reactions after a session? Nowadays I would include case histories, but at the time I didn't have enough to draw from. Working alongside, sharing a tearoom with, and promoting my work to the practice staff continues to be an interesting but enjoyable challenge.

### **The future**

I enjoy being a biodynamic massage therapist so much that I find it hard to experience working with clients as 'work' – however expanding my practice has to be done with care as I also have some significant upcoming projects to complete in my role as a freelance illustrator/designer.

I am seeking another venue from which to practise, however many complementary health clinics charge room rental rates too great to be financially viable. Fine if you are an osteopath seeing two or three clients an hour and able to cluster

appointments together to avoid paying for a room which is unused, but much less feasible if you can only see three clients in a four hour period (costing £30 at one clinic, with slots starting only at 8am, 12 noon or 4pm available to book) and recommend that they come at the same time and day each week – making it much harder to avoid gaps in the schedule.

I continue to explore new possibilities; ZB in particular offers a wide range of courses, but I am always on the lookout for others which might help to widen my understanding of energy work, for example other types of massage or healing, especially involving chakras (which I don't feel I've really 'clicked with' yet). There are also lots of promising books on my shelves which I bought while browsing on Amazon yet which await the right moment to be read.

### **Feedback**

I would welcome feedback, both positive and negative, from other practitioners on the content of this article; please email me at [vicki@morealive.co.uk](mailto:vicki@morealive.co.uk).

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