

# Freud, Reich, Lowen: An Historical Overview

Looking Back to Where We Have Come From – Towards a Better  
Understanding of Where We Are Now

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## I. Introduction

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I also want to thank the committee (Scott Baum, Virginia Wink, Ed Svasta and Bill White) for all the work that went into making this memorial possible. Also Barbara Brendel and Ron Panvini).

I must ask for your patience with my habit of referring to Al Lowen at times as Al , at times as Al Lowen and at times as Lowen- depending on the what feels right at the moment) Also, I will use the masculine pronoun for simplicity.

I am deeply touched that the committee asked me to give this part of our two-day memorial to Al. I understand that it made sense to them since, along with Alice Ladas and Vivian Guze, I am one of the few who are still here that were actually present (around 1960) when our institute was very young - when Al and John Pierrakos and Bill Walling began to hold their Tuesday evening clinical seminars in New York, and Al's first book had just come out—there was a sense of great things to come.

I will be talking about the evolving models of health in which Freud, Reich and Lowen believed and from which they derived their understanding of illness and its therapy. I will also talk about the actual behavior regarding clinical theory and practice which the three modeled for us... the actual behavior they modeled being, I would argue, at least as instructive as the models about which they spoke.

The title I was asked to speak on, "Freud, Reich, Lowen, An Historical Perspective", is interesting both for what it says and for what it does not say. It honors the pioneering and enduring genius of the three men. It also omits the rich context of ideas, debates and discoveries from colleagues and from other disciplines from which the three men benefited and borrowed in the process of creatively synthesizing their clinical theories. I am also suggesting that this rich context and bioenergetics as an evolving work in progress, continues even as, without its dynamic leader, it has, of necessity morphed into a community of brothers and sisters.

It may be a bit soon to put Al Lowen in historical perspective. His loss is still fresh, and the witness and testimony of the next two days will give us a sense of the regard in which he is held by us. But like many of us who knew the man, he both gave me precious gifts and at times disappointed me. Personally, he was a father figure for me - a leader, teacher, mentor and therapist. I especially treasured the bright light of his clarity and certainty during years when I had lost my way and feared life's darkness.

As I have said, we are looking back today, to honor Al Lowen, and in the process, hopefully to better find our way forward. Most of us would agree that if bioenergetics can be called a science, it is a very subjective one, for which compelling empirical proofs are hard to come by. Consequently, a central issue for our institute is the extent to which we will become defined by a closed system of thought, free from dissent, and unified by our loyalty to the charismatic leader whom we are here today to honor. Or, will we, as was clearly modeled by Freud, Reich and Lowen themselves, feel free when exceptions and contradictions and empirical data challenge the explanatory power of our existing clinical hypotheses, to question said hypotheses.

## II. The Men They Were – Some of the Behaviors They Modeled For Us and What Came of it All

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Interestingly, the three brilliant, charismatic men just mentioned- perhaps possessing a trait of brilliant, charismatic men in general, did not make a habit of stating that the cutting edge of their basic theoretical and clinical views were actually hypotheses awaiting empirical confirmation. Or if they did so, somehow the force of their personalities endowed tentative ideas with the aura of delivered truths. The three, each in their own way, psychosomatically exuded an air of certainty, even as they were actually living in the question - exploring and discovering. Over the years, as a disciple struggling to find my own truths, I remember being startled by hearing Al say, at various points along the way, “if I only knew then what I know now”. Certainly it had been important to me that he knew the whole truth and nothing but the truth, and it took a long time before I realized when Al said something with certainty, that, at a later date, he might revise it as he learned more. Charisma and self-doubt probably do not travel well together.

This said, Al set an example for us all in how he both remained deeply true to his Reichian roots and still found his own way. He was both deeply loyal to Reich and yet did not canonize/mummify his teachings, but rather infused them with his own inspiration, and his own creative center. In this regard, Al recounts that he was reluctant to identify more fully with the group of orgone therapists around Reich, because they had developed an:

“almost fanatical devotion to him and his work. It was considered presumptuous, if not heretical, to question any of his statements or modify his concepts in the light of one’s own experience. It was clear to me that such an attitude would stifle any original or creative work. These considerations dictated that I maintain an independent position. (Lowen, 1975, pp. 36-37)

Lowen tells us of a sudden realization that turns out to have been foundational for us later-day Bioenergeticists:

... another Reichian therapist, Dr. Pelletier, who was outside the official circles opened my eyes to the possibility of modifying or extending Reich’s technical procedures... Reich had stressed that my jaw should hang loose in an attitude of letting go... Dr. Pelletier observed that he had found it helpful to have patients stick their jaws out in an attitude of defiance... Of course, I realized, it would work either way, and suddenly I felt free to question or change what Reich did.” (Lowen, 1975. P. 37) (end of quote)

The rest, as they say, is history. Lowen systematized character analysis, extending Reich’s theories to all the different character types. He further delineated the character dynamics psychologically and physically and described their libidinal connections. Al developed expressive exercises, and got his patients onto their feet, developing the basic bioenergetic concept of grounding.

I know that Al set an example for me when the time came that I no longer needed him to protect me from the high pedestal on which I had put him, and I in turn had to find a voice to express my

unique bioenergetic truth. As we look back, I also want to focus on that part of our journey under Al's leadership during the last three or four decades. I am suggesting that, as an institute, we can best honor Al Lowen by following his example. That is, to engage in the ongoing challenge of remaining true to our bioenergetic roots, without rigidifying the truths they hold such that we are no longer a living body of artisans. As Al modeled for us, we can reach for a bioenergetic institute that moves from and is inspired both by what Al inherited from Reich, what he added to the bioenergetic work in progress and what we each in turn bring to it.)

Neither Freud, nor Reich nor Lowen were known for being especially supportive of colleagues whose views differed from theirs. But I would suggest, that in his own special way, Al Lowen tolerated much more varied and rich contributions from his junior colleagues than did either Freud or Reich. Because of his complex relationship to Reich and the way he could not share his self-appointed role as the standard bearer of Reich's insights, Al was not often able to publically affirm, especially in print, the contributions of his junior bioenergeticists...however, many of us were struck by how in private moments he could be deeply affirming of the value of our work. And I would argue that as I speak, our institute today, indeed because of our imperfections and lack of homogenization, is a tribute to something vital that ,directly or indirectly, we were given by Al.

In a keynote address in 1996, Al spoke candidly about how he struggled with this issue- although I am no scholar of either of the three men, I have not come across anything indicating that either Freud or Reich were as aware of the personal motivations that colored(better word?) their quality of leadership, as was Al when he shared the following with us 13 years ago. He said:

I took a big step toward freedom when I announced at my eighty-fifth birthday party, that I was resigning as Executive Director of the IIBA...I had felt for many years that many members of the international faculty were not focused on the energetic or physical issues of the patient's problem as I believed they should be... Whether I was right or wrong is not important... Why did I need them to do it my way? Why did I need them to follow me? ? I think that the Institute gave me a sense of support and power that would enable me to prove that I could save the world. In this I shared some of Reich's messianic ideas, some of his megalomania (delusions of grandeur) and insecurity.(P. 12) (end of quote)

In this room today, and in our institute at large, I thank God that we do not all see things the same way. There may be those who feel that they practice a version of bioenergetics that is truer and more loyal, to Al's fundamental vision. Others, like myself, still believe we are true members of the guild, even though we incorporate into our clinical work ways of understanding and being with patients which were not Al's ways. What I do hope that we all share, and what Scott Baum described as foundational in his recent inaugural presidential message (IIBA Spring 2008 newsletter) to us, is a commitment to keeping our patients' (and our own) somatopsychic unity or lack of it, at the heart of our clinical encounters. This was Reich's enduring gift to us: the functional identity of a person's character and his bodily attitude. It will not go out of style.

The committee, in recommending that I give this talk, reminded me several times that “you were there”. I understand that the hope embodied in this phrase is that I was alive and breathing- however shallowly- around the time when bioenergetics began, and that I can therefore convey to you some essence that may no longer be with us. Clearly that essence was about the tremendous vitality and hope that Al inspired in those of us in his presence. His sparking blue eyes, a resonant timber in his voice, and the sureness of his touch and his words... his was the stuff of psychosomatic charisma- his inner fire burned bright. Add to this the loving synergy that moved between Al and John Pierrakos at the informal Tuesday night clinical seminars, and it was indeed a special time in the young life of bioenergetics.

While my having been there and sharing this early excitement with you is important, I want to suggest that something, less obvious is equally important. That something is that I was there and I am still here! The fact that fifty years later, I still think of myself as an active member of our bioenergetic community, speaks directly to a special kind of legacy that has grown while Al was our leader.

During the past 50 years, many clinicians came to bioenergetics and left the fold after a while... usually having been enriched by Lowen the man and his teachings, even while they needed to move out from under his roof. As I increasingly found my own voice, there were several times when I thought that if I did not move out myself, Al might invite me to do so. But he did not. And I am still here. I suspect I may be speaking for many of us who are still here and who spoke with their own voices while under Al Lowen’s tent- when I say that there was something about Al’s tolerance of our contributions that has made possible the vitality of our Institute. Forgive me for mentioning only three among many examples of this vitality- First, our revised, state of the art 2005 bioenergetic training curriculum put together by Violaine de Clerck, Guy Tonella and Odila Weigand – Second, the clinical treasures in the Bioenergetic Reader (2008) put together under Vita Heinrich’s leadership and Third, the exciting work that continues to come out in our Journal, currently edited by Vincentia S. Margit K. and Mae N. We are indeed a worldwide bioenergetic community that lives, breathes and pulsates. While, as I have mentioned, in his role as bearer of the Reichian standard, Al did not often cite the contributions of the generations of Bioenergeticists who followed him, who knows how many of us are still here because we have touching stories of how Al more privately let us see and hear his approval and even pride in our creative contributions?

### **III. The Model of Health Determined the Form and Goal of Therapy**

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But let us take a closer look at the background from which Lowen's Bioenergetic analysis emerged:

Freud's intellectual debts to Aristotle, Darwin, Hegel, Ernst Haeckel, Hughlings Jackson, Charcot, and many of his own circle are beyond the range of this talk. For our purposes to day, in the late 1890's Freud, shockingly, called attention to the hidden force of human sexuality; even more appalling in Viennese society, he identified childhood sexuality as the cause of psychoneurosis. In his early formulations, seduction and the resulting trauma were central ingredients. All neurosis had a sexual etiology, a disturbance in the energy of the sexual drive which Freud called libido. Initially, for Freud, this was a physical energy, which, when interfered with by unhealthy sexual practices, led to neurasthenia and anxiety-neurosis. Shortly after 1900, Freud progressively moved away from seduction and trauma and from a physical energy as central to the etiology of psychoneurosis.. The point for us, is that psychoanalysis became increasingly a psychology of ideas, concerned with the contents of the mind. Along this path, Freud revised his model of the mind several times, finally giving aggression equal status with libido in his dual drive theory. The scale of the carnage of the Great War made it clear that men's destructive instincts could not be adequately explained by a sexual drive.

Enter Wilhelm Reich, to whom we owe the foundation of bioenergetic analysis: the functional identity and antithesis of mind and body. At the age of twenty-seven, he took over the Technical Seminar in Vienna, and pioneered the treatment of character neurosis as requiring consistent focus on the resistance and transference. His emphasis was on the latent negative transference. Expanding on the work of Abraham and Alexander, Reich had made character a primary focus of psychoanalytic treatment.

But while he clinically sought out the hidden negative transference, Reich understood these latent hatreds as the result of sexual repression. He felt that Freud had made a terrible mistake in positing a biologically driven death instinct. This abstract theory could be used, Reich felt, to justify inept treatment. Indeed Freud's outlook had become increasingly pessimistic. Not only was there an inherent drive to suffer, but repression and sublimation of instinctual gratification were givens if one was to successfully adapt to society. As Freud put it, a successful psychoanalysis could do no more than replace neurotic misery with ordinary human unhappiness (1895, p. 305)

Reich's position (he was, by the way, forty-one years younger than Freud) was quite the opposite. He viewed all anxiety as resulting from repressed libido and he became increasingly involved in vigorous attempts at societal and political reforms. It was Reich's hope to create conditions that would foster a guilt free genitality in the younger generation and in the working classes. In the *Mass Psychology of Fascism*, he described the connections between sexual repression, the fear of freedom and submission to authority

Reich picked up and never gave up on Freud's early understanding of a physical sexual energy as the cause of illness. He considered this the legacy from Freud which underlay his life's work: the energy principle- what he called the quantitative factor- and which years later Lowen identified as one of the five basic bioenergetic principles. Which leads us at last to orgasmic potency. This, as opposed to Freud's unhappy vision, became Reich's criterion of health. He never relinquished his belief that health was synonymous with this capacity to discharge the organism's excess energy in the total body involuntary convulsive experience. But, over time, he too became less optimistic about what therapy could accomplish, and used the metaphor of not being able to straighten out a tree once it had been bent. He devoted himself increasingly to laboratory research, and believed that change would be a gradual process. He was hopeful for the unborn children of future generations. Now if you think the matter of defining what healthy sexuality is has proved easy, listen to Al Lowen:

Of course Reich is the only one who really defined sexual health. The problem with Reich's definition is that the idea of orgasmic potency as he describes it, is a state that's very, very difficult for any human being to really achieve...not that it isn't real... but human beings, because of splits in their personality..(which follow from a culture that does not support health). cannot fully give over to the sexual feelings. (p. 9, IIBA Journal, Winter 1988-89: Opening address) (end of quote)

Realizing this, as he developed bioenergetics, Lowen deemphasized orgasmic potency and stressed the development of a healthy, mature personality as the goal of therapy. The sexuality of a mature individual, was an expression of love. But a loving sexuality was only one of the ways in which an individual expressed himself. The main criterion of health, then, became the ability to fully express oneself. But to achieve this goal, a person's personality problems had to be worked through thoroughly. Lowen stated clearly that neither his own character analysis nor the physical work with Reich had gone far enough. There were no short cuts: draining the excess energy from the neurotic character, removing the biopathy, could not be done without also thoroughly working through the somatopsychic details of that character structure... And then there was the culture.

I think it is accurate to say that in the last twenty or so years of his active career. Lowen became quite sober about the potential of even the best Bioenergetic therapy to restore health as he defined it. If I understand him, Lowen, in substantial agreement with Reich, views the outcome of the familial oedipal triangle as more or less crippling for most people in our culture. The child is not able to grow naturally out of his or her passionate feelings for the parent of the opposite sex and jealous and competitive feelings for the parent of the same sex, because the whole complex is so threatening that it must be repressed. This occurs because neither parent is sufficiently secure in themselves or their relationship to each other, so their own guilt, fear and hatred are projected onto their children. This situation is traced back by Lowen to the time in our civilization when mankind gained power over nature, and patriarchal values of power and success began to dominate the matriarchal values of mystery, surrender, and oneness with the body. Thus, for Lowen, paradoxically, maintaining health is a life-long struggle to stop struggling and to find the

wisdom to surrender to failure. Lowen writes eloquently and in great depth about these issues in "Fear of Life", which he considered his most important book.

Few of us would argue that one can straighten trees once they are bent, or that ours is a culture that supports health. Further, I believe it is in the healthy nature of things, that the older people become, the more they learn that they can do less to change things than they believed they could when at the height of their powers. Perhaps the wisest among us are able, as Lowen taught, to sufficiently accept our impotence and to change in spite of ourselves. Having said this, although I am getting older, I am obviously not wise enough to let things be, and would like to suggest another issue that may have contributed to that part of the legacy left to us by these three men that concerns the limitations of therapy.

All three of these giants, especially Reich and Lowen, believed that infancy was a crucial time of life. But in their theory, and especially in their clinical presence and quality of contact, I suggest that somehow they were so focused on oedipal sexuality, that some of the issues which we have just mentioned as belonging to the patriarchy, were relatively neglected. Notwithstanding the cultural dominance of left brain functions and ego values which Lowen saw as destructive, recent decades have seen a resurgence of interest in and respect for the right brain and its implicit realm, especially in our field. Recent empirical research, for instance, documents how early attunement to and respect for both the unique bodily rhythms and the unique quality of mind of the developing infant codes for its basic security of self well before the oedipal drama unfolds. Recently, Elaine Tuccillo and Diana Guest, members of our own institute, have offered a needed relational model of healthy sexual development and a model for working less judgementally with the actual sexual realities of our patients' lives (a broader paradigm of erotic development). One can hope that this clinical research may help us better understand the basic insecurities of self that are traumatized by the powerful force of sexuality.

So I am suggesting that these three men, being men, not surprisingly, bequeathed us models that could use a touch more patriarchy. A little more mystery in the model, for instance. I mean by this a therapeutic model that assumes, even though we are armed with our Reichian Rosetta stone-assumes that the patient has an inner life and mind which we can at best read with difficulty. Having said this, I will borrow from Garry Cockburn's recent paper in our Journal. Garry, himself borrowing from the French philosopher Paul Ricoer, suggested that one does well to search the works of a genius for unexamined meanings.

So, I propose that there is a relational aspect imbedded in Reich's and Lowen's models which neither of them explicitly examined as fully as they might have, but is nonetheless implicitly present.. It is to be found in Reich's description of what he called the "genital embrace" and is the germ of the more heartfelt and relationally aware model of sexuality that was developed by Lowen and those that have followed him. It is from Reich's book "the Murder of Christ" and I am

indebted to the late Miki Frank for calling our attention to it in the IIBA Journal of Spring, 1993. This is the flavor of the beautiful chapter, for those of you who may not have run across it:

It takes many months, sometimes years, to learn to know your love partner in the body. The finding of the body of the beloved one itself is gratification of the first order... this search itself and the mutual wordless finding one's way into the beloved's sensations and truly cosmic quivering, is pure delight, clean like water in a mountain brook. This heart-warming continuous experience of love and contact and mutual surrender and body delight is the decent bondage which goes with every naturally growing marriage... The genital embrace... does not differ basically from any other life activity, be it of great or little importance. Full living means full surrender to any kind of functioning." (pp. 37-38) (end of quote)

Reich seems to be suggesting that the embrace of which he speaks is of life itself. He continues:

The genital embrace... does not differ basically from any other life activity, be it of great or little importance. Full living means full surrender to any kind of functioning."... marriage has to grow slowly from the seedling toward the fruit. And it takes years to grow a fruit-bearing tree... The growing itself, the constant experience of a new step, the discovery of a new kind of look, the revelation of another feature in the partner's make-up, no matter whether pleasant or unpleasant, in itself is great delight. It keeps you moving... and it keeps your face capable of flushing at the right moment. (P. 37) (end of quote)

Reading Reich's chapter reminds me of the experience of standing near some massive blocks of marble, unfinished sculptures of human figures by Michelangelo. I remember being stunned by the power of these human forms emerging from the inert stone. If you can forgive me for stretching my analogy here, I feel that Reich was capturing an essence of intimacy: dwelling with, in his words, "quivering" with, the slowly revealed, unknown other. His genius here foretells our current understanding of a cornerstone of the health-giving relationship, both of parent to child and therapist to patient. On the one hand, mutual moments of merger via attunement to and respect for the natural rhythms of each other; on the other hand, the "delight", as Reich puts it, of "discovery", when the inner life, dare we even say the mind of the intimate other reveals itself to our attentiveness in a look or the suggestion of a gesture.

*Returning to our honoree...*

#### **IV. AI Gave Us a Model of Relationship Based On His Life Experience**

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He often used the word “guide” to describe the role of the therapist. What did he mean? AI was in therapy with Reich for two and a half years. From 1945, when he stopped, until approximately 2005, a full sixty years later, what AI actually modeled for us was a therapeutic journey without a therapist. Although his therapy with Reich had been tremendously important, AI tells us that he soon realized he had not gone very deeply into his issues. I believe AI’s teaching, his wisdom and legacy to us were about what he did for most of his life. His central passion was about healing the mind-body split, and his chosen path to this goal was his own self-exploration. In this exploration, there was essentially no therapist other than himself. In the process, he gave us the gift of a passionate exploration of and brilliant illumination of the endless facets of the mind-body’s unity and duality of function. He did this, arguably as not even Reich had done, and, less arguably, as no one after him will likely do. So I am suggesting that AI was guiding us through what was the larger reality of his life: In his model of the therapeutic relationship, the therapist offered what AI had found for himself: an understanding of the blocks to the natural motility and expressiveness of the mind/body... in its tissues organs and organism as a whole, and as it relates to deep emotions and experience of self in illness and in health. What he wrote about the therapeutic relationship reflected the truth of his personal struggle and movement towards more health. AI states candidly in his writing, that bioenergetic analysis has been an elaboration of his own search for a satisfying, meaningful and healthy life. His passion was in this search, and no therapist other than himself accompanied him. Consequently, Lowenian bioenergetics does not dwell on the details of a therapeutic relationship which AI did not have, but rather about his search for a unifying resonance between a trillion cells of psyche-soma.

It is possible, but not likely, that someone will emerge from among us post-Lowenian Bioenergeticists who will be able to lead us with the force of certainty about his truth that emanated from Freud, Reich and Lowen himself. It is not likely that anyone will soon match AI’s passion for and genius at knowing a person in and from the pulse of their body. Nor, for that matter, will anyone soon convey the same force of personality that Freud, Reich and Lowen brought to the clinical encounter. It will be interesting to see what kind of therapeutic outcomes and unforeseen partnerships may arise as our patients sense that, even though we do the best we can to read in their psyche-soma the person that they are, we cannot see into their deepest recesses with the same conviction in the clarity of our vision. Sensing that we need help to unveil (unravel) the mystery that they are, they may have to engage with us in a slow, implicit, mutual process of discovery, not unlike that which Reich captures in his genital embrace.

Finally, on his odyssey, Al left us many treasures.. I do not know if this is also true for some of you, but it has been so many years since I first was exposed to Al's way of sensing and understanding what is going on energetically in the tissues of a patient's body, that this sensing has become second nature to me. Consequently, it is all too easy for me to forget that, even if it is out of my conscious awareness, his legacy is part of how I am in the room with my patient, and is coloring my interventions on a daily basis. From among endless clinical gems, I will share one vignette in which Al's gift guided me into an intense relational experience:

Quite a few years ago, probably watching Al doing a demonstration session, he put his hand over the left chest of the patient and commented that one could make pretty direct contact with the patient's heart- I found the comment both obvious and startlingly powerful- as you know, that was often a signature quality of his comments.

So a few months ago, working with a 50-year old male patient, my hands found their way over his left chest. This happened every now and then and my patient always found some kind of deep comfort from it. A few months prior, it had triggered a deep experience of melting into a state of loving feeling which was new to him. This time, however, it led to him feeling a barrier covering his heart and he said angrily, "I am not going to cooperate- won't give you what you want. I'll do it when I'm ready"... This was followed by "but I do feel the value of what you are doing- don't give up on me- I don't want to be left alone" He then said, "you must be a valuable human being... I've always thought of you more as an excellent therapist". I said "perhaps you are also a valuable human being". After a silence, he said," Doing this kind of work must be quite moving for you" I said, "yes it is". Our words do not quite capture this man's soul coming to the surface of his being and enveloping us in its poetry. Al Lowen, via bioenergetic analysis gave me (us) this and similar kinds of clinical 'now moments' in which we are privileged to directly touch the living body such that we unveil the grace of self.

## **CODA**

Reich and Lowen were inspired by a vision of the human organism as part of a pulsing, energetic continuum- a continuum whose patterns ranged from the sub-cellular through the organismic orgasmic sexual embrace and out into the spiraling nebulae in the cosmos. Most of us treasure this legacy, it inspires us, even as we struggle to stay grounded in its presence.

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