

Palermo Panel

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INTRODUCTION

I want to thank SIAB for hosting this event, and Patrizia Moselli and the Scientific Committee for asking me to participate in this panel, and especially Garry Cockburn for lots of help.

I see my task as a bit odd in that I have a limited familiarity with the TRE exercises and no familiarity with the populations that David has been helping throughout the planet in these past years. Nonetheless I am going to focus my remarks on the place (or the integration of) that David's approach to trauma may have in Bioenergetic Analysis- I define Bioergetic analysis as a relational somatic psychotherapy.

David's Keynote remarks lay out very clearly a neuroanatomic and neurophysiologic perspective on grounding with which I largely agree. He does not mention TRE by name in the 3 pages which he sent to the panel, so I assume that the "neurogenic tremors" which he does mention several times refer either to those produced by TRE or by Bioenergetic grounding work or both. But in my attempt to focus on the relevance of his approach to an ongoing relational somatic therapy, I will refer to his book, "the revolutionary Trauma Release process" (Berceli, 2008) and website and videos because I feel they may better capture the excitement and promise of his approach, (the message that he wants to give back to the world) than the down to earth very grounded keynote he just read us.

Even though it is so obvious that it almost does not need to be said, I want to commend David for the amazing creativity, energy and compassion with which he has reached out to traumatized, underserved populations all over the world. I am a Bioenergetic therapist mostly treating middle and upper-middle class patients; I imagine I am not alone in being grateful that David is providing a viable way to reach hundreds, even thousands of people who have suffered beyond imagination with nowhere to turn. David brings to this endeavor a keen sense of the reciprocal altruism and healing power of people caring for people in local ravaged communities. Additionally, I imagine he works in cultures where one-to-one therapy as a paid for commodity would, per se, make no sense in an ethos of group-based identity.

Finally, it is pretty much impossible in one approach to encompass the entire human being-body/mind/emotions/spirit... not to relatively neglect one aspect in deeply addressing other aspects... we bioenergetic practitioners (are reminded) learn again from TRE how foundational (basic) both grounding and a flowing, vibrant body are to our work.

QUESTIONS

This having been said, I am going to ask a series of questions and speak quite personally in a way that I hope will keep you awake and hopefully induce some trembling/tremors in my knees/legs.

A. Because David's journey as he tells it (in his book) has led directly to his developing the TRProcess, I want him to tell us more about that journey than he reveals in his book. In that book he shares the deep, anguished struggle to come back from the PTSD that resulted from his years in many war-torn lands. But he says nothing about what kind of a person he was before his trial by fire transformed him into a man living in deep contact both with his spiritual core and with others... living, as it were, in the eternity of the present moment. Does it really matter, you ask? If David Berceci were Johannes Kepler discovering the laws of planetary motion, I would not care what kind of a person made these discoveries. But if David is a healer, and I know he is, then I submit that I am almost as certain that he is a wounded healer, as Kepler was certain that the planets moved in elliptical orbits. I confess that my evidence is only anecdotal: that is, I have never in my wanderings met a healer who was not significantly wounded.

And if I am to trust my heart to a healer, I want to know what kind of a wounded person he was before he or she assumed the mantle of healer. When I was a patient, I came for help with the trauma of an early ongoing betrayal of my trust by my primary attachment figures. Most therapists know that this embeds the trauma in the very cells of the body. How can it not? Our survival instincts are programmed into our bodies to impel us ever closer to the source of danger. Like an amoeba, our organism recoils and contracts from pain, but simultaneously, like a mammal, its protest and expansion are genetically coded to bring it closer to the source of pain.

In 2000, I told Peter Levine that for the helper or guide of Somatic Experiencing to be a healing presence for patients with a story like mine:

“My trauma was so essentially a betrayal by those that I loved and trusted that there is simply no technique on this planet that overrides what I sense about my therapist's humanity... his ability to tolerate my hatred and brokenness... his ability to be with me in our mutual helplessness. I need to know if he is able to spend as much time with me- not knowing if we will make it- as he spends with the therapeutic approach that makes him comfortable.” (Lewis, 2004, p. 8)

So I want to know David more deeply. I want to know if David B. developed the TRE from his own body. I want to know if we really all have the same “naturally healthy vibratory rate” (Berceci, 2008a, p. 132) which will “allow us to live in commonality with all other living organisms on the planet” (Berceci, 2008a, p. 132). It could be that we do! But what interests me most is a practical question. What impelled David to put himself in harm's way again and again. He made life

decisions that are beyond my middle-class (upper-middle class) comprehension. David tells us that:

“If most of us seek out trauma situations in which to help, it’s usually because we feel guilty. Few of us go out to live in trauma in order to allow it to change us. This is what separated Mother (Teresa) from the rest of us” (Berceli, 2008b, p. 117).

Only David can tell us what combination of guilt and the more evolved motivation of Mother Teresa moved in him. But I want to propose a third model that David has not mentioned. Now I was never fortunate enough, as was David, to meet Mother Teresa, or Ghandi for that matter. But I was very lucky to meet the woman, Barbara, who in a second stroke of luck became my wife for these 46 1/2 years. I imagine that you too, David, must have crossed paths with such people. They are around. They do not call much attention to themselves. They grew up in families that cherished them and attuned to them. They do not, as you describe in your book, like most of us lead “inauthentic lives” (Berceli 2008c, p. 125) shut off from an awareness of their essence. Granted, we in this room may not see them often, because they are underrepresented among psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers. My wife has always had a keener sense than I of life’s essence... of the fragile and precious gift that we’ve been given. And, interestingly, her deep Lutheran belief in an afterlife never seems to stop her from living much more in the moment than I do. I am blessed when Barbara invites me to share the moments of little kindnesses. Finally, as David says, more or less trauma seems inevitable in the human soup we live in. But Barbara tells two stories in which her momma seems to have snatched her from the jaws of trauma 1) her mother could not be stopped from coming into the operating room when Barbara was 5 1/2 she held her hand until she was put down with an ether mask 2) when her home was bombed and Hamburg was in flames she survived the suffocating heat as a 4 y.o. in her mother’s arms in a bomb crater filled with water. Decades later, she sometimes startles more than I do at a truck’s loud backfire.

We know that acute traumas in otherwise relatively healthy individuals have very different outcomes from those that occur when betrayal is engraved in our bodies and souls by our primary attachment figures. David must have worked with a staggeringly complex variety of trauma survivors in the past 15 years. I am wondering if, in addition to the success stories that populated his book, there have been failures. Moshe Feldenkrais is said to have declared that the only case histories worth publishing are our failures – from which we keep learning. Most of us, myself included, would rather forget them. Have you, David, not come across sexually abused people whose procedural neural circuitry includes feelings of overwhelming shame at the loss of control of their body in involuntary tremoring? Some of my patients, at times, when they feel safe enough and often with my physical holding, shake in terror from head to foot as the frozen life impulse begins to move in them. But this emerges in the moment, rather than in an imposed exercise.

Robert Hilton, echoing much of what I heard from several experienced Bioenergetic colleagues, tells us that:

“... an alive, vibrating body without a relational contact to help this body be a person, can be a source of terror and invites dissociation as a form of survival. And after having survived through dissociation, to return to a vibrating body, releases the expression of that terror along with a killing rage and unbelievable grief. (personal communication). Hilton adds that Lowen, wrote that opening the pelvis and sexuality releases the "repressed ghosts of the past" (Lowen, 1966, p. 9) (The rhythm of Life, Lecture given at the Community Church, New York City in the Fall of 1966, p. 9)

If I understood your healing process, David, you spent nine months in a hermitage and needed a great deal of solitude and yet were in a holding environment composed of other monks. And you had a guide (the abbot) who was a crucial link to reality. You struggled for several more years to let go of the past and reach a deep stage of forgiveness and compassion for yourself. I could not tell how much the TRE was part of this process. I confess that I cannot wrap my consciousness around your description of this phase of your life:

“I began to see that my individual attempts at forgiveness somehow contributed to the ‘evolution of the moral universe’ “ (Holloway, 2002, p. 24-as cited by Berceli, 2008d, P. 111)

I can't imagine that you could have helped such numbers of people in such dire circumstances if you did not communicate warmth and some mixture of passion and compassion for their plight. I do not know if you were broken in spirit and body as I was, before you became a healer. But I believe that those of us who carry deeply dissociated, shameful shards of self, will not be healed by any vibration under the sun, unless they are accompanied by an attuned caregiver.

C. Which leads me to a paradox. Considering that you are a CBT, I do not really understand why neither your book nor keynote make any mention of Reich and Lowen.

Do you see your creative elaboration of grounding the pelvis through the iliopsoas as in the tradition of grounding created by Lowen? Consider your statement:

... the body is a pure history book of what happened to it. This is because, unlike the ego, it cannot make things up. What it tells us about ourselves is pure and undistorted (Berceli, 2008a, p. 127).

Is this not vintage Lowen? Another one of my questions. But now comes a statement:

In spite of your apparently not considering yourself in the lineage of Reich and Lowen, I see you as possibly having something important in common with them. I wrote an article in 2007, citing a number of autobiographical and biographical texts, in which I suggested that Lowen and Reich's attachment history had left them as relatively insecure people. I said that in spite of our enormous debt to them, they had created a school of therapy that reflected their doomed attempt to

compensate for the inner emptiness that in turn resulted from their lack of ever having had a fundamentally secure relationship with their fundamentally insecure parents. Their solution was to substitute their bodies, their sexuality and energy for the missing external secure base. Although you say that the TRprocess is not a therapy, and you did not come here for a public psychoanalysis, I would suggest that the TRprocess is setting up another sought-after ideal state, analogous to Reich's genital character. In this case a trauma-awakened-transcendent- vibratory-spiritual self.

THE FETAL POSITION

66 years ago Moshe Feldenkrais (1949) described a universal inborn flexor fear or startle response in our arboreal mammalian ancestors. The violent flexor contraction pulled the organism into the fetal position, and thus it protected their vulnerable body parts when they fell from a height. You, David, did not have to read about his discovery in a book because you discovered it personally when you were under fire.

This "flexor withdrawal" (Berceli, 2008, p. 39) response, involving the psoas flexors turned out to be central to your development of the Trauma Release Process. Do you have any thoughts as to how this tight trauma-induced fetal position is related to the generic fetal position which millions- perhaps billions (I do not believe the prevalence of this practice has been precisely researched) of people find profoundly comforting. Many of us assume it when going to sleep – not as an emergency reflex to protect our underbelly and the ventral surface of our body – but to "spoon" (we say in English) with our loved ones in an embrace. It seems unlikely that we do this because we have been traumatized?

I often offer my back to patients who then wrap themselves more or less around me in a fetal-like position. Can there be something healing about physical dyadic contact in flexion, just as there is something healing about shaking, trembling on one's back in relative extension?

INCLUDE THE HEAD

When I picked up the IIBA Journal in 1999, I was startled to read that in your excellent article on "Trauma and the Startle Reflex" (Berceli, 1999) you had come to conclusions quite similar to mine in my delineation of the clinical construct I called cephalic shock. I had started writing about cephalic shock in 1976 (Lewis, 1976) essentially saying that the head was a relatively neglected part of the body in classical Bioenergetic Analysis. In the latter you were to try to get the patient out of his head and into his body. I had suggested that it would be much better for the patient's

psychosomatic unity if he actually got in touch with his shocked and frozen head so that, among other things, it felt and moved like the rest of his living body when he breathed.

I noticed, David, that in your article, you focused on and recommended specific body interventions for the head and neck. In classical (Lowenian) Bioenergetics, the head was often not included as part of the body. And I notice in your book (Berceli, 2008, p. 138) you first say that the therapeutic shaking..."reverberates through the entire body..." (p. 138), But then you specifically describe the shaking as traveling up the spine and only going as far as the neck (p. 138). Over the years grounding has always been most powerful for me when it included the head. Please comment.

IN CONCLUSION

After all my questions David, I remain personally very interested in the intense vibrations which the TRE triggered in my thighs... when I remember to take the time to lie down, the vibrations actually have a life of their own without any TRE warm up. I am quietly intent on exploring them further

(due to time constraints (and perhaps the nature of my questions) at the Palermo IIBA Conference, David Berceli did not answer any of my questions. However the Scientific Committee felt that it was important, per se, for a clinician to address some of the above concerns in a public forum. I am currently reaching out to David in the hope that he will fill in the panel discussion that we never had.)

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