IN MEMORIAM

Re-embodying the Mind and Re-minding the Body: In Memoriam to Alexander Lowen

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Alexander Lowen (1910–2008), a gifted therapist and prolific author, passed away on October 28, leaving smaller the number of luminary giants who founded humanistic psychology. His beloved wife, Leslie Lowen, preceded him in her passing and he is survived by his son, Frederic Lowen, and grandchild, Sonya. For more details on his life, see his recently completed autobiography, Honoring the Body (Lowen, 2004).

Lowen was an analysand and protégé of the famed and controversial psychoanalyst, Wilhelm Reich (see Reich’s biography by Sharaf, 1994), who pioneered body-based or somatic approaches to therapy within a psychoanalytic framework. Holding two law degrees when he first started working with Reich, Lowen decided to change careers and attend medical school to become a psychiatrist, which he did by successfully completing medical school in 1954. Then, building on Reich’s (1980) seminal insights, Lowen developed bioenergetics (also known as bioenergetic analysis & bioenergetic therapy) along with his psychiatric colleague, John Pierrakos, by further innovating somatic approaches into psychoanalysis until it eventually evolved into a unique humanistic approach to psychotherapy emphasizing healing what Lowen frequently called the mind-body split.

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It is impossible to discuss Lowen without overviewing the therapy he
innovated, as the two are so intertwined. Bioenergetics provides ways to
diagnose and therapeutically intervene using both psychological and
somatic methods. Its diagnoses focus on understanding psychological
concepts through traditional psychoanalytic and more contemporary neo-
analytic perspectives (e.g., attachment theory & revised understandings of
defense mechanisms), as well as through somatic perspectives, such as by
observing body structure (e.g., static posture) and function (e.g., respiratory
movement). These stem from Reich’s (1980) work with chronic muscle
tension (i.e., body armoring) in understanding emotion. Emotion refers
etymologically to movement (i.e., e-“motion”) and, because muscles are
organs of movement, armoring is understood to inhibit feelings and their
emotional expression (e.g., pelvic muscular tensions block both sexual
pleasure and performance) analogously to how psychological defense
mechanisms are seen as operating.

Although Lowen discussed mind and body as if they were separate, he
assumed their functional identity and acknowledged their differentiation
as only a semantic artifact: mental experiences (e.g., panic proneness)
affect somatic expression (e.g., chronically-raised shoulders defensively
anticipating an attack and expressing fear), and somatic expressions (e.g.,
chronically-raised shoulders) affect mental processes (e.g., increasing break-
through panic) in mutually-reiterative fashions. Consequently, bioenergetics
holistically merges both psychological and somatic processes in its interven-
tions: psychological work searches for meaning, yet somatic work increases
movement freedom and energy availability to enhance the person. The goal
of bioenergetic diagnosis is to understand the overall life quality of a person
(e.g., how depressive symptoms might be seen as related to a diminished
felt-sense of psychological freedom & decreased somatic energy due to
chronic muscular tension inhibiting respiration). Likewise, bioenergetic
treatment for such a depression might involve both employing active physical
movements (e.g., kicking) to increase somatic energy combined with psycho-
logical explorations to regain contact with emotions blocked by muscular
tensions that can only become experienced after release of these tensions.

Although bioenergetics may be applicable to a variety of psychological
and physical conditions, it may be particularly useful for so-called negative,
or diffuse, symptoms, such as generalized lack of feelings of aliveness.
Lowen often critiqued conventional talk psychotherapy as resulting in fleet-
ing psychological change that, without concomitant somatic change, tends
to relapse into characteristic dysfunctional experiential and behavioral
patterns, and he critiqued purely somatic interventions, such as Rolfing,
as lacking psychological integration techniques needed to result in lasting
physical changes; in contrast, bioenergetics combines psychological and
somatic approaches to resolve emotional difficulties and enhance pleasure more than can either isolated approach alone.

During the early days of humanistic psychology, Lowen frequently presented on bioenergetics, sharing the stage at places like Esalen with other prominent humanistic figures, such as Fritz Perls, Carl Rogers, and Virginia Satir. His work within these settings, quickly unfreezing audience participants into deep emotionally meaningful experiences through dramatic somatic interventions, attracted many to bioenergetics, as did his numerous books, which influenced a generation of psychotherapists, especially *Language of the Body: Physical Dynamics of Character Structure* (Lowen, 1958/2006) and later *Bioenergetics: The Revolutionary Therapy that Uses the Language of the Body to Heal the Problems of the Mind* (Lowen, 1977). He also built a large training program with international reach, which continues as the International Institute of Bioenergetic Analysis and certifies bioenergetic therapists. Throughout his career, he remained a caring therapist, continuing to see clients in his home office until shortly before his death. More important, he personally lived his life based on bioenergetic principles (e.g., he literally would engage in bioenergetic exercises, such as kicking on a mattress 200 times every day, well into his late 90s). We remember his last public workshop in Florida a few years ago, when he answered a question one of us asked about why he had worked so hard intellectually in writing his many books while he advocated living a life founded on embodied feelings and not intellect; his answer was succinct and poignant, “it gave me pleasure.” Lowen was an earthy man, one who never lost sight of the importance of the body, even as he accomplished so much in the intellectual arena. Humanistic psychology, which often tends to become overly intellectualized, benefitted greatly from Lowen’s constant enjoinders to heal the mind-body split by re-embodying the mind and re-minding the body.

REFERENCES


