



YEAR END EDITION

Emphasis Is on the Practitioner: The Art of Being Present

by Angela Porter

When I was 8 years old I remember standing in the hallway outside my classroom at Thousand Oaks School. My classmate Evie, who was much younger and smaller than me, was crying. Sharon, another second grader, had uninvited Evie to her birthday party as a result of something that happened on the playground during recess. Evie, distraught, spoke tearfully between gasps, wondering what she had done to deserve this dismissal. I stood there leaning in, earnestly trying to offer insight and comfort. I felt uncomfortable, out of my depth, but Sharon *was* my best friend that day so maybe I could help. The thing I don't remember is if I *did* help. This was my first counseling session.

I got my first professional counseling job at age 26 working as a drug counselor in a residential drug and alcohol program. We had 65 clients, tons of paperwork, and rules for everything. This was back in the days when drug addiction was untelevised and unglamorous. Our clients were tough people who lived hard lives, many coming from generational legacies of addiction. The counseling team was small. We did case management, group therapy, treatment planning, housing placement, medication calls, and Christmas caroling. I learned a lot.

Our methods for treating addiction were extremely dogmatic. Clients either fit themselves

into a very systematized, prescribed box labeled Recovery, or were ostracized and expelled from the program. They were addicts first and people second. Counselors were myopic in approach, moving mostly from reaction and instinct, often emulating senior therapists. We offered one-size-fits-all solutions and cookie-cutter treatment plans. Emotional drama got the attention, behavioral compliance the accolade, insight was minimal, and the body was completely left out of the process. Still, there were many things I loved about the agency I worked for. The treatment process itself was brilliantly structured, and the peer support phenomenal. Many of our clients did successfully recover from substance abuse, reclaim their lives and families, and go on to be successful people. Yet something was missing for me. I had a longing to work more holistically. Intuitively I felt that the body was a missing element, was key to understanding and healing, and had to be included. After three years I left that job still passionate about the field, but burned out.

I was accepted at Esalen Institute as a work scholar where I would live and work for the next two years while studying Gestalt Therapy, Integrative Body Psychotherapy, Hakomi, and various other somatic therapy practices. During this time, I studied with Christine Price, Will Schulz, John Heider, Robert Hall, Stan Grof and Ron Kurtz, some of the great pioneers of Somatic, Humanistic, and Transpersonal therapy practice. The structure was neither rigid nor dogmatic, but flowing and flexible, sometimes barely contained. Encouraged to cry, sing, dance, scream, and play, we explored and expressed without limit, and the body was primary. In addition to my Gestalt and somatic therapy studies, I got Rolfed, rebirthed,

massaged, danced the 5 Rhythms, vision quested and Shamanic journeyed. It was an amazing, expansive, and wonderful time.

About a year-and-a-half into my studies at Esalen I began to wonder where all this expansive experiencing was going. I got in touch with and expressed a lot of 'me' energy, but to what end? I was definitely more tuned in to my own body, had learned a tremendous amount about the integral relationship between *psyche* and *soma*, and how emotional experiences are stored in the tissues. Yet I sensed that I was still living at the surface of myself—I couldn't go further, I didn't know how. I needed direction, cohesion, a system; something portable that was applicable to my life in the "real" world, and connected me purposefully with other people, yet was transcendent. When my internship ended, I returned to my counseling practice in the Bay Area, hoping to integrate some of what I had learned.

I began counseling people with co-occurring substance use and mental health issues. During the few years I was away at Esalen, the drug treatment field was bursting with new theory and protocols. It was an exciting time. Clients were now not only seen as human beings, they were individuals, and addiction was a medical condition rather than a moral dilemma. My treatment team included therapists and psychiatrists, as well as a nurse, a dietitian, an acupuncturist, and a personal trainer. There were so many emerging modalities each designed to address a different part of the "problem." Now it seemed we were at the opposite end of the spectrum and while multifaceted, some of the common-sense wisdom of my early training was missing from drug treatment counseling.

What I also brought home with me from working in the Esalen gardens were two herniated disks in my lower back, for which I was told I would re-

quire surgery. Terrified at this prospect, I took the recommendation of a friend to visit a small chiropractic clinic in Rockridge. This was my first experience of Breema. What I didn't know at the time was that Breema would become foundational to my therapy practice, enabling me to digest and meaningfully integrate all that I had learned up to that point.

I went to the clinic weekly for several months to receive Breema bodywork treatments. My back was healing, and I no longer required surgery. Yet



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In the session, I represent acceptance for my clients. I work with being present so I can model that for them. Because of my study and practice of Breema, I may have developed that more, but my goal is to help them find that in themselves.

— Matthew Tousignant, MA, Somatic Psychotherapist
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, US



As a client, when I look at the person who is my therapist, I want to know that someone is 'home' there. I don't just want someone who is trying to compute how they can fix me, I want to know that I am actually being seen and being heard. So how does the therapist make sure they are actually seeing and hearing the other person? By experiencing their own presence. Everything else that happens once this presence and connection is established becomes available in the moment. All the tools I have acquired in my professional training become available to me when I am present, and I know what is needed.

— Aron Saltiel, Mag Phil, Psychotherapist, Graz, Austria

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it took a while before I recognized that more was happening in those treatments for me than therapeutic bodywork. I started to notice that often after receiving the Breema treatments, I would feel lit up inside, more connected, alive, and cohesive. This experience included my body whether or not it was in pain. And while I had no interest in becoming a bodyworker, I began to study Breema.

Breema has the unifying effect of bringing body, mind, and feelings together to function harmoniously. Based on a profound understanding of the interrelated and interconnectedness of all life, Breema is **Being Right Now Everywhere Every Moment Myself Actually**. It is an actual direct inclusive experience of myself that does not rely on words or ideas, or what I look like, or how much money I make, or whether I am doing a good job, or how I feel. Breema is concerned with Being. Practicing Breema I come out of the reactive concepts I have about myself and I experience life directly, being here with the activity of this body.

Body breathes. Body has weight. I can know this directly. *I experience body has weight in the chair*. I remain with the activity of registering weight and breath, and experience a cohesive energy, *body-mind connection*; then my feelings join in and I become receptive, experiencing what in Breema is called a *taste* of being present.

When I first began to study Breema I was attracted to the ease of being—the overall sense of relaxation and wellness I experienced both receiving and doing the bodywork. I found myself reaching for the Principles—*Body Comfortable, No Hurry/No Pause, Single Moment/Single Activity*—and the simple instruction to come to weight and breath, while driving my car, washing dishes, or reviewing charts in my office.

Over the next several years my life became a whirlwind of activity, and practicing Breema supported me while I navigated graduate school, internships, a full-time job, and increasingly began to show up in my work with clients. I spent significantly less time in reaction to my own thoughts and feelings about the people I worked with, which allowed me to participate more fully in sessions. This saved me tremendous energy and time.

I did an in-service staff training on stress reduction for my agency, based on Breema's *Nine Principles of Harmony*, and was invited by one of the directors to teach Self-Breema movement classes twice a week to a group of 40 active duty veterans on leave from the military for substance use treatment. This was a pilot program and if successful would open the door for many military personnel to receive treatment services before returning to active duty. The simple exercises proved extremely useful to these men, helping to mitigate their experiences of mental chatter, anxiety, depression, and sleeplessness. One initially reluctant young man approached me at the end of a class and asked me to show him one of the exercises again saying, "my brain stopped talking, for the first time in my life, I was quiet inside." He was so grateful. Over the seven years I taught that class, so many of the veterans expressed similar experiences, and I wondered if this profoundly simple practice might truly offer something to help mend the traumatic experiences that fragmented these soldiers and disrupted their ability to relate to life in society. Regretfully, I never pursued this possibility as I was promoted to program director at my job and was no longer able to teach the classes.

Determined to continue practicing *body-mind connection* in the midst of my new job, I began doing body-centered meditation in my daily staff meetings and, more and more, the principles and practice of Breema became the basis of my process groups and session work with clients.

To do this, I come to an experience of myself first, then I am available to my client. I bring body and mind together and I listen. I have learned to listen with my whole body. Thoughts come in, "you have to do something, say something"...

Body Comfortable

I shift in my chair, adjust to be more comfortable, and invite my client to do the same. I see that I'm watching with my mind.

No Force

"Ok mind, come back to body."

I inhale and exhale, and I stay with that. I begin to relax and experience that my body has a posture.

No Judgment

I inhale and exhale, I let go of expectation and I begin to experience the quiet vitality of being present. Thoughts are included in a larger frame, in an atmosphere of acceptance where the problem is now a drop in a larger picture of *Being* rather than the whole frame.

If I am sitting with a client, really practicing *Body Comfortable*, this creates an atmosphere wherein the body and mind of my client are supported to do the same, inviting the Principle of *Mutual Support*. Then, as we talk and exchange, the client directs by their expression where the session needs to go and what is needed from me, the facilitator, as a next step becomes clear. If a CBT cognitive dissonance exercise is needed to clarify a relational dynamic, then that is what we do; if a Gestalt experiment is needed to bring a conceptual concern to the realm of experience, then that is what we do; if an assessment/mental status exam, a medication evaluation, Socratic questioning,

reflective listening, or just sitting quietly, is what is needed, that becomes clear. What is not needed also becomes clear. I listen for when to stop or shift gears. I am open to something higher than my own thoughts and feelings to support the process, yet grounded in connection to the body.

When I am present, my clients benefit. What I bring to the session more than anything else is myself, my level of being, how I am. I bring what I embody, in this moment. And when I bring an actual, tangible atmosphere of self-acceptance, regardless of what appears in the room, or inside my own thoughts and feelings, then without saying a word, my clients receive that. *I benefit*, because I don't have to figure out how I need to be or how they are, or pretend to know something I don't—none of that. The process of therapy becomes an exchange of aliveness where through the emphasis on being present my clients increasingly become the true compass for their own journey.



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Trained in Gestalt, Body-centered, and Somatic therapy at Esalen Institute, body-mind connection is primary in her work.

Formerly a program director at the New Bridge Foundation's residential substance abuse treatment program in Berkeley, CA, Angela incorporated the principles and practice of Breema into the treatment curriculum. Currently she is a group facilitator at Bayside Marin and maintains a private practice where Breema is foundational to her work with clients as well as in her consultation practice with colleagues.

A certified Breema instructor since 1998, she also keeps an active travel schedule teaching Breema workshops for therapists and other healing professionals.

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The United States Association for Body Psychotherapy, founded in 1996, is an umbrella organization for the emerging profession of body psychotherapy – an expansive, emerging, multi-faceted field that affirms the inseparability of mind, body, and spirit. <http://usabp.org>