

**From:** Michael Bellah <mdb@chagrinriver.net>  
**Subject:** Finding the Pulse article by Nancy  
**Date:** March 3, 2009 7:20:46 AM GMT-05:00  
**To:** Michael Bellah <mdb@chagrinriver.net>



---

Finding the Pulse  
Lived Experience in Psychotherapy

By Nancy Napier

Take a thoroughly unremarkable moment in the psychotherapy hour. Perhaps a client with a history of putting his needs aside makes an innocuous request—he could be the overly responsible oldest in a family who, early on, learned his exclusive role was to take care of others, or someone whose parents were too neglectful to attend to him or even acknowledge that he had an internal life of his own. At a lull in a session, he offhandedly asks you for a glass of water. There's no fanfare, no great show of emotion. Certainly one possibility is to just get the glass of water and leave it at that. But imagine that the last session had brought more of this client's history to the surface, and you decide that this is an opportunity to focus on an aspect of social interaction that you suspect might be charged with significance for him, even if he's spent his life ignoring it.

So you ask him if he'd be willing to slow things down a bit and notice what might be going on beneath his usual reactions. He agrees and you ask him to take a moment to sense what's happening in his body. As he does so, you go and get him the water, hand it to him, and sit back down. Once you've done that, you ask him to take a moment again to sense what's going on inside.

At first, his automatic psychological response is likely to kick in. Encouraged to verbalize it, he tells you that he supposes you're slightly annoyed with him for sending you on an errand focused on his immediate needs. So far so good. But then you invite him to check what he feels in his body, not just what's going on in his mind. What does he sense in the room between the two of you at that moment? What does his body feel coming from you?

Taking a little time with this, he may notice that his stomach is unexpectedly calm. Then, when asked to focus on what he imagines to be your annoyance, he may sense that you seem calm and not especially put out. As this focus on the minutiae of the moment goes on, he may even make a crucial discovery: his body is contradicting what his psyche is telling him. The simple act of focusing awareness offers transformative possibilities he was likely to ignore when he was just paying attention to his habitual reaction.

I don't jump on every single shift that occurs in a given session and slow things down in this way. Clients would undoubtedly get annoyed if I were to stop the work constantly to focus on every passing emotional flutter. But when the interaction involves what I recognize as something that reflects an important developmental or traumatic theme for the client, I'll often stop and invite a greater awareness of whatever is going on in the room and in the arena of body awareness, which typically goes unrecognized.

I call this opening up to a fuller dimension of physical, sensory, and emotional response becoming aware of a "lived experience." In my work, I continue to discover how simple and effective it can be to slow down things and take the time to allow this kind of opportunity for resonance, empathy, and repair to emerge in even the most undramatic moments of the therapy hour.

#### Learning to "Trust Your Gut"

Many of us learned as young children to shut down our gut feelings about others or about what was happening in our world, and to pay attention or respond only to outside demands. Learning to attend consciously to our lived experience—to the physical sensations that emerge as things unfold in the present moment—helps us reverse that training and reclaim our body's ability to speak to us clearly and directly. Again and again, I've seen

the first inkling of a powerful transformation emerge when I invite clients to compare their physical responses during significant interactions with me (their "gut feelings") with the psychological meanings they assign to such moments ("She's only being polite," "She really thinks I'm a whiner").

Recently a client was suddenly gripped by an unexpected jolt of fear when I asked about a difficulty she was having at work. She found herself stumbling to describe her experience and then becoming uncomfortably self-conscious, frightened that she wasn't answering the question I'd asked her. She flashed on an early memory of having been unexpectedly hit on the hand with a ruler by a grade-school teacher, and became certain I, too, would turn on her at any moment.

I asked her to stop and notice my actual response to her—the tone of my voice, the expression on my face, what she sensed in the "felt" space between us. Because fear is so powerful, it took a couple of such invitations before she began to notice that my body was relaxed and my face was open. Eventually, she said she noticed a shift in her chest—a sensation of loosening, of more space—as she settled into the possibility that I wasn't going to attack her. I invited her to just take some time to experience and integrate the sensation of having more space in her chest. Then, once she was more relaxed, we explored her earlier school experience and how it had created a generalized expectation in her body and psyche that she could be attacked by an authority figure at any moment.

When I work with clients in this way, the nonverbal dimension of what's going on is central. We only talk about feelings and thoughts after allowing enough time for the physical experience to become part of conscious awareness. When we do explore thoughts and feelings, I make sure to offer them an ongoing invitation to notice what's happening in their bodies.

It's said that the body processes experience at one-seventh the speed at which it processes thoughts and emotions, so it's vitally important to give the client's physiology time to reorganize fully in response to shifts that take place in a session and integrate them into a new lived experience. Giving enough time also may allow the hippocampus, which plays a vital role in short-term memory, to sort through the features of the new experience and organize itself to retain it.

### Breaking Mental and Emotional Trances

For some clients, focusing on the body can interrupt the endless repetition of themes and complaints that seem to be stuck in the "on" position. Think of the last time you sat with a client and thought you just couldn't bear to hear the same story one more time. However, when you're able to help a client track body sensations and activation patterns in the nervous system, you can enter his story in a different way. As the client begins his litany for the hundredth time, instead of getting lost in the content, you can invite him to notice what happens in his body as he tells the story. Then, shifting away from the story to the body, you can encourage him to notice what happens when he pays attention to his inner sensations.

I remember a client who began a familiar litany of anger about an older cousin, starting, as always, with the comment, "I can't believe he got away with hurting me and no one ever punished him!" This oft-repeated complaint had generalized to her relationships with many other people, as she continually bemoaned what she believed was unfair treatment. This time, I stopped her and asked that she notice what was happening in her body as she thought about her cousin. As she shifted her focus, she was able to move out of the repetitive content long enough to experience something different. Slowly she became aware that her chest felt clenched and tight, and, from this sensation, she began to recognize the fear that lay beneath her chronic complaints. Once she started tracking her physical sensations, instead of just replaying an old tape, she began to explore her experiences with her cousin from a new, and ultimately more helpful, standpoint.

"Lived experience" can be an invaluable resource in helping clients make the distinction between past trauma and their current lives. In one session, I was working with a woman who was reliving painful memories of how her father mocked her when she was young whenever she began to cry. As she talked, the tears began to flow and she looked away, feeling the shame and humiliation she'd experienced years before. But this time, instead

of inviting her to revisit her childhood experience of feeling her father's judgment and contempt, I asked her to notice how it felt to be able to look away—to notice the liberating physical experience of being able to break contact and create some breathing space for herself. We shifted away from her memories of her shame and humiliation to the experience of her more resourceful adult capacity to turn away in the present moment without negative consequences. This small act of newfound personal power represented a liberating option: a choice in the present that would have been impossible or dangerous when she was young.

One of the satisfactions of being a therapist is seeing that, as clients resolve the challenges that brought them into therapy, they can spontaneously begin to live more actively. We don't have to teach them how to come alive; it happens naturally when the nervous system feels safe. As clients become less stifled by outdated responses and rigid beliefs, their ability to engage directly with life emerges more and more. Once the nervous system heals, the psyche automatically follows, even in clients who've been caught for years in trauma-based patterns.

### The Self of the Therapist

Just as infants piggyback on the nervous systems and brains of their primary caregivers, our clients piggyback on our physical self-regulation and capacity to contain whatever intense feeling and emotion emerges during the session. Our clients aren't going to be able to ground themselves and regulate their own arousal if we can't regulate ourselves. We need to be able to be aware when we're beginning to get emotionally and physiologically reactive, and find the means to rebalance ourselves, so as not to lose our capacity to remain calmly and empathically present.

Years ago, a client and I were having what I thought was a lively exchange about something—I can't remember the subject matter at this point—but I was apparently rather energetic on my end of the dialogue. At one point, when there was a pause in the action, my client leaned forward a bit and quietly asked me if I'd mind putting on my seat belt. I had an immediate experience, in my body, of how much I'd been leaning forward and of how much energy I'd been putting into our conversation. Since then, I've always had a strong physical sense of when I have my seat belt on and when I'm starting to lose it. When I get a physical awareness of putting too much energy into my end of things, I know it's time to self-regulate.

Whenever I find myself "losing my seat"—not feeling physiologically or emotionally grounded—during a session, I take a moment to feel the support of the chair I'm sitting on. Then, I focus for a few moments on my breathing. For me, breathing into and out of my heart space is a good way of settling down quickly. I know I'm back on track when I get a sense of solidity and spaciousness inside. The process of returning to regulation is different for each therapist, but the important thing is to have a regular practice for settling yourself that works for you reliably.

Taking time is the key to doing any kind of body-based therapy. Peter Levine, the founder of Somatic Experiencing, says that when an important emotional shift happens, it's important to allow time for the client to process it thoroughly. In fact, it's impossible to allow too much time—when you think you've taken enough time, take even more.

As a talk therapist, one of the biggest shifts for me was to learn to trust this focus on time—to offer clients enough time to allow their inherent body-mind "blueprint for health" to do its work. To take time has required me to get out of the way; to discover that my presence is what counts, rather than any "pearls of wisdom" I feel compelled to share. The more I've sat with people and watched what happens when they have time just to be with themselves, the more I've learned to trust the value of getting out of the way.

In my consult groups, one of my real delights is to observe therapists discover how relaxed they feel when they realize they don't have to work so hard; that they can trust the client's inherent wisdom and the body's guidance. Throughout years of practicing body-based psychotherapy, I've been surprised to end most days feeling more refreshed than I'd ever have imagined. During sessions themselves, I'm relaxed and easy, even when the client is stuck or the session presents unexpected challenges. Now curiosity is my constant companion, along with the

trust that the client's body will show us the way.

The two keys to opening a fuller dimension of experience in therapy are helping clients develop an acute awareness of what's happening in the present and making good use of the most powerful healing resource we have: time. By inviting clients to allow their awareness to absorb the rich sensations and feelings unfolding in the moment, we help them connect with an inherent body-mind wisdom, hardwired in each of us. Once they learn to notice more fully what their bodies are telling them, the therapy process can become less effortful and more rewarding for both clients and therapists.

Nancy Napier, L.M.F.T., teaches Somatic Experiencing for the Foundation for Human Enrichment. She's the author of *Recreating Yourself*, *Getting Through the Day* and *Sacred Practices for Conscious Living* and coauthor of *Meditations and Rituals for Conscious Living*. Contact: [njnapier@aol.com](mailto:njnapier@aol.com) This e-mail address is being protected from spambots. You need JavaScript enabled to view it . Letters to the Editor about this article may be e-mailed to [letters@psychnetworker.org](mailto:letters@psychnetworker.org) This e-mail address is being protected from spambots. You need JavaScript enabled to view it .