

Metavision

by Matthew J. van der Giessen

One of the reasons I like my internet discussion group is that it gets me thinking. And every once in a while, some connections get made that I might not have put together on my own. Here, for example, is an email response to a discussion about the relative merits of stretching between practitioners of several different techniques who were getting stuck in their paradigms. What I said went like this:

In my experience, the comparison of yoga, pandiculation (the stretching form of Hanna Somatics) and physical therapy stretches that was being discussed several days ago is a very sticky area to get a handle on. I'd like to add some thoughts to the discussion that have helped me get some clarity.

The effectiveness of various forms of body therapy, including associated treatment forms such as types of stretches, will continue to be debated for some time to come. However, I have found it is useful to note that, in fact, the outcomes of a wide range of therapeutic modalities are essentially the same.

For example, photo documentation of the results of Alexander technique, a very non-invasive approach from the Somatic Education stream, and Rolfing, where the depth of penetration makes it in many ways the antithesis of Alexander's approach, both have shown the documented affect of lengthening, widening and realignment of structure that is both profound in the change effected, and has additionally shown the ability to stabilize and be integrated into a reorganization of the individual's use of their body.

Other bodywork approaches as diverse as tai chi, yoga, Trager's approach, and Hanna Somatic Education show similar abilities in prolonged change through reorganization of body use. Probably, each one of us could add our own experiences with similar changes in our clients using the techniques we feel most familiar with. The problem is, it doesn't happen often enough, and we can't always predict when we are going to get the result we are hoping for.

So if it is possible to get similar results from almost any modality some of the time, what's going wrong when what we know doesn't work? And additionally, how can we know what approach to apply on a basis that has more to do with intuition, or worse, a pin the tail on the donkey approach?

In approaching these matters it is helpful for me to remember Jung's comment that every psychological approach is formed around the way the originator sees the world. In bodywork this means that each modality is a paradigm, a way of organizing meaning out of world experience that is uniquely that of the person who invented the form. As with any individual's view, each modality has some genius and insight, but it is also limited by the very fact that it is one person's experience. Every paradigm has its limiting edges.

So, in answer to the first question, to understand the contributions and limitations of any paradigm we need to have a bigger picture so that we can see where the paradigm fits, and where it doesn't fit so well.

The example of stretches is useful here because it illustrates a way in which different paradigms view a way of using the body in different ways.

For example, the Somatic Education stretch - pandiculation - that was talked about is a movement of the body in an expansive movement outwards. It's the morning stretch that allows us to open up our space and move to a more energized and expansive sense of self.

On the other hand, the yoga stretch is one of "letting down". We stretch a muscle group, feel its restriction, then breathe into the holding and allow the muscle to release. Instead of expanding, we tend to have the experience of settling into and letting down from our held place.

These two paradigms speak to two basic ways we get blocked in our movement of expression in the body:

- a) we block our movement to moving into energize response or,
- b) we block our movement to letting down from energized response.

As Hanna himself pointed out, his paradigm seemed to deal with about 50% of the problems a person experienced in the body. Traditional massage works well when we need to let down from a holding and we need to get "worked on" so we can have something to let down to. But it doesn't work so well when we need to be helped in moving through blocks to expansion, as when our bodies need to complete a defensive motion around a car accident and the resultant injury.

Central to reorganization in the body is the experience of feeling met. When we feel met in the body, we have the opportunity to experience new possibilities in our body as it finally has a chance to move through its conflicted state (tension) and into a greater freedom of expression. We learn a new way of experiencing ourselves in our body, and through that learning, have the greatest possibility of moving into a new, and stabilized, way of being in the world.

When we are met, any form of somatic practice becomes educative. When we aren't met, we don't engage with the practitioner, we don't engage with our bodies and a change in relationship with our bodies doesn't occur. We are left feeling anything from resistant, sore, worked on (or at) and stuck.

Each paradigm will always be able to sing the praises of its effectiveness. What we don't hear are the stories of those who quietly left because they didn't feel met.

We have a wonderful array of modalities to choose from these days. What we don't have is the training in the meta-picture so that we might better know when to use which tool for the job at hand. In my view, this is the next step that is needed in developing therapeutic maturity in the somatic therapies.