

AQUATIC BODYWORK FOR TREATING TRAUMA

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Abstract

Aquatic bodywork by integratively trained therapists is a profound and safe way to help people heal from trauma. Case studies and video show how aquatic bodywork gently invites traumatic memory into awareness, calms the nervous system, reduces hyperarousal, and effectively reprograms the nervous, emotional and energetic systems toward health.

Introduction

When trauma surfaces in the body's memory while the client is being held in warm water, it enters the natural flow of life. While it's often terrifying, somehow it also seems "normal." By normal we don't mean "acceptable" but that which is a part of the ebb and flow of life's energies. When memories of trauma arise in water within the arms of one dedicated to holding others in unconditional love, the energy of trauma lets go. Aquatic bodywork creates an environment so different from the traumatizing event that frozenness yields to warmth and numbness to feeling. Movement, expression and transformation follow and the trauma becomes simply another memory.

Aquatic bodywork includes a number of modalities (Watsu® www.waba.edu, Healing Dance® www.healingdance.org, Waterdance) in which the client is held by the practitioner in body temperature water and moved gently. Depending on the modality and the training of the practitioner, a session can include work with the acupuncture meridians and points (Watsu®), dance movements, massage, craniosacral therapy, somato-emotional release and others. Some sessions also involve total immersion of the client underwater using noseclips for the length of his breath (WaterDance and Healing Dance®). Of all the benefits we've witnessed in our many years of offering aquatic bodywork, our work with those who suffer from trauma is the most rewarding, confounding and profound.

In this paper we will describe how aquatic bodywork by integratively trained therapists offers the key elements characteristic of effective approaches to healing trauma. We will also show how the unique qualities of aquatic bodywork facilitate deep and transformational healing from trauma. Several case studies are included to illustrate the effectiveness of this work, including two long-term treatments with multiply traumatized, dissociative clients. Names and identifying circumstances have been changed to protect confidentiality.

Aquatic bodywork increases the potency of other effective modalities, such as subtle energy healing, energy psychology, Somatic Experiencing and Hakomi. Cross-training in these and other modalities offer promising opportunities for practitioners and those who come to them for help. We blend the principles of all these modalities in the SMART Process, which we will describe in this paper and show in video in the conference presentation.

Finally, we conclude with ideas for research and the opportunities we offer for training body psychotherapists in this integrative approach to healing trauma.

Let's begin by relating Diane's account of a fairly typical aquatic bodywork session that illustrates our approach:

Renee began to draw her knees to her chest. I followed her movement with awareness and touch. I listened and watched closely, and placed my hand mindfully on Renee's belly, which seemed to be the center to which she was bringing her legs. The constriction of both muscle and energy was palpable. Rather than try to massage it away, I just stayed there with my awareness, meeting the pressure with the touch of my hand, following her breath. When I say I listened and watched, I don't mean there were sounds or something to see externally. I was sensing deeply into what was being held without the need to do anything about it. The tension mounted for a while and then her body began to unwind. Her legs began to kick slowly, then more vigorously. My hand stayed at her belly, holding the fulcrum from which the release could happen. I tracked and followed the movement of energy as Renee began to move her arms and then shake her hands. Her voice joined in, haltingly at first, but then with the full-power sound of release.

Following the release, Renee's body softened. I held her in stillness, fully aware of the space between our hearts and inviting healing light to it. Very slowly I began to guide Renee's body into a wave-like movement, right to left, front to back. She sighs, and her tears flow gently and sweetly. She's calm. Tension arises again later in the session, and we repeat a similar process as each layer of trauma releases, followed by integration and transformation.

As the session ended, it took a while for Renee to come into ordinary consciousness as I brought her to the support of the pool wall. I helped her ground by touching her shoulders, elbows, wrists, knees and feet. Once fully back and able to talk, Renee reported that a memory of an abusive childhood experience came to her during the session. Even though she had talked about this incident with her psychotherapist, this was the first time, she said, that she both felt the experience so deeply and was able to release it. More than that, Renee felt a quality of compassion and love all around her in the water such that when she thinks of the incident now, it doesn't create the emotional reaction and fear it once did.

Many experiences like Renee's have shown us the power of aquatic bodywork in helping someone heal from trauma. Whether it's a small trauma, like being yelled at or a big trauma like severe abuse, the healing space that is created by the warm water, the aquatic therapist and the person whose trauma is ready to be healed, aquatic bodywork can be just

what's needed. Let's look at how we understand the nature and symptoms of trauma.

What is Trauma?

Of the various definitions of trauma (1, 2) we think Peter Levine's, "Too much, too soon, too fast" summarizes it best. We would add "not enough" as in severe neglect, especially in infancy. Severe trauma can result in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a prolonged state of trauma, for weeks and years following the traumatic event. All of us have experienced trauma as we encounter life's physical and emotional bumps and bruises, the effects of which can still linger long past the event itself, especially if we didn't have the support we needed to heal from the trauma at the time it occurred. The degree of trauma follows a continuum from simple and mild to severe and complex, all of which can be healed. Trauma affects the nervous system, the emotions, thoughts and energy field of its survivors, all of which interact to create its characteristic symptoms.

We've been impressed by the wide range of trauma that surrenders to the water's flow. Among those we've worked with are:

- Water trauma, fear of water
- Prenatal and birth trauma
- Auto accidents
- War trauma
- Medical traumas
- Attachment trauma, neglect
- Sexual Abuse, molestation

It's not uncommon for major trauma to be resolved in a single session. In other cases, treatment over a period of years is needed to move layer by layer into the complexities of multiple, severe and even ritual trauma.

Symptoms of Trauma

Because the limbic system of the brain and the autonomic nervous system become hyperaroused in trauma, a memory of the trauma can evoke a similar hyperarousal in the person. They may become hypervigilant, startle at the slightest touch and/or simply become numb or frozen in the presence of an event that triggers a memory of trauma. Conversely, in a situation like Renee's, tension held by trauma comes into the person's awareness when they experience a safe space. The body seems to know when conditions are right for healing. Once triggered, however, the nervous system responds in its conditioned way. With Renee, her belly tightened up and she drew into a protective posture. Other symptoms (3) observed or reported by survivors of trauma include:

- fear and avoidance of cues reminiscent of the original trauma
- flashback memories (triggered by people, places, things, sounds, smells or thoughts)
- anxiety/depression/emotional numbness
- panic attacks
- dissociation

- restlessness
- uncharacteristic irritability or outbursts of anger
- problems focusing or concentrating
- feeling isolated, disconnected and “different” from others
- Insomnia, excessive sleep, nightmares
- excessive use of alcohol or drugs
- Conditioned neurologic response to internal and external triggers

While many of us experience some of these symptoms some of the time, for someone with PTSD, they are a part of daily life. We often find trauma hidden in the chronic pain or illness, depression and/or relationship problems our clients bring to aquatic bodywork sessions. Like with Renee, it's rare that our healing partners come with the intention to heal trauma; it just arises naturally in the session, sometimes for the first time.

Treatment of Trauma

Throughout our history, humans have tried everything from drumming circles to electric shock therapy to free our brothers and sisters from the life-diminishing effects of trauma in our lives. From our collective training and study of trauma strategies, we've identified those elements that are common to the *most effective approaches* to healing trauma. In order to be effective in healing trauma a therapeutic practice must:

- bring a traumatic memory into awareness,
- calm the nervous system,
- reduce hyperarousal, and
- reprogram the nervous, emotional and energy systems toward health.

Many of our clients have tried years of talk or pharmaceutical therapy only to find the trauma still binding their bodies and hearts. Once they are held in water, it comes into deeper awareness. Let's look now at how Diane incorporated these effective approaches into the unique healing environment of warm water.

Hank is one tough dude—a rodeo rider. As he told me about one musculoskeletal injury after another, I looked at his taut muscles and huge frame. What kind of floats would I need to help me support him? He hadn't had any kind of aquatic bodywork before, but said he heard it was relaxing and he really needed to relax. I applied the floats and began to float him. Surprisingly, he readily surrendered to the warm water and easily relaxed. One muscle group after another twitched and let go as I waded his body through the water. This was way easier than I thought! He even looked like he'd fallen asleep.

Slowly, however, the body tension increased overall in a kind of frozenness. Sensing into where the tension was centered, I gently placed my hand at his side, sensing and meeting what it was that drew my hand to the area around his liver. His body, like Renee's, began to unwind from that fulcrum

and I followed and supported, glad that I had put so much flotation on him. Muscles and limbs twitched in a very open and generalized way, which I thought related to all the rodeo injuries letting go of the energy of trauma.

Then he curled up and began to cry, hesitatingly at first, but then in sobs from deep in his body. He shook a bit, unwound some more, cried again and then settled into a deep peaceful relaxation that lasted for the rest of the session.

His eyes were amazingly bright as he related his experience of the session. He was happy to feel so relaxed so easily, he said. Hank noticed his muscles twitching and felt good with the releases. Then, however, memories surfaced of atrocities he'd witnessed in Viet Nam. He said, "I couldn't believe that was still in there! All these years!" It felt to him, he said, like it was happening right now, not over 30 years ago. Then he chuckled and grinned, "You know it's gone! I can't believe it! I've never felt so good in my life"—and he looked it.

The Unique Qualities of Aquatic Bodywork for Healing Trauma

Safe, nurturing environment.

With both Renee and Hank, the traumatic memory came into their awareness within the safe, comforting and nurturing environment of the warm water. They knew about the trauma previously, but Renee thought she'd dealt with it in psychotherapy and Hank thought he'd successfully put it out of his mind. This natural arising of the trauma instills both safety and trust in the process for the client. Being held and gently moved through warm water:

- serves as a probe, which evokes experience and unconscious material,
- engages the parasympathetic nervous system for overall calming of the activated sympathetic nervous system.

Heart field of practitioner

Several scientific studies point to the qualities of water that magnify and transmit subtle energies (4). Since, in aquatic bodywork, the person is physically held within the energy field of the practitioner's heart, the emotional and spiritual development of the practitioner is especially important. Research at the HeartMath Institute (5) demonstrated that the receiver's energy field can entrain with the coherent waves of the practitioner's heart field, that radiates several feet outward and profoundly influences those nearby. Therefore, if the practitioner can transmit compassion as the traumatic memory is surfacing, the receiver's energy field is bathed in that energy, further contributing to the sense of safety and comfort that wasn't present following the traumatic incident.

Movement through warm water - Physiological and energetic effect

“Movement as medicine,” says Alexander George who developed Healing Dance®. Peter Levine (6) tells us how the organism knows how to disperse the energy of trauma through movement, if given the environment and opportunity to do so. In addition to the environmental factors listed above, the three-dimensional and gravity-free movement possible in water:

- allows for complete release and unwinding of muscle tension and trauma energy
- calms peripheral nervous system as water flows over skin
- evokes unconscious material
- aids pendulation, the shift in awareness back and forth between trauma activation and safety
- bilateral movement assists the brain to come into balance
- allows for integration and transformation after the traumatic pattern has been released

Generally, water sensation on the skin due to movement is pleasant and calming, often bringing someone into stillness. Usually the only sound she hears is her breath. Stillness can evoke a whole range of sensation and response from within. If intimacy is part of the trauma wound, sympathetic arousal can accompany and rise out of the stillness.

Both partners initiate movement at different times in the dance of aquatic bodywork. As Hank began to unwind his body in response to the movements Diane initiated, she just supported his process. After Renee released the tension in her belly, Diane initiated bilateral movement to facilitate integration. We'll further discuss how we work with the dynamics of movement later in the SMART Process.

The underwater work creates an even greater physiological response called the “Dive Reflex” (<http://divingindepth.com/mammalian-diving-reflex/>) which slows the metabolism, heart rate and breath. This work can bring about an even deeper trance state and sometimes a complete cessation of breath for long periods. This apnea is referred to by George as “Kumbakha,” an advanced form of pranayama. In Yoga this practice is for deep relaxation, rejuvenation and health. Kumbakha signals transformation, usually after a release. The system is resourcing in the parasympathetic, relaxing and trusting completely.

Energetic effect on trauma activation

Depending on the training of the practitioner, aquatic bodywork enhances the therapeutic advantages of the acupuncture meridian and subtle energy therapies shown so effective in healing trauma. The water allows for easy stretching of the acupuncture meridians. Acupuncture and subtle energy points can be readily accessed, on both the front and back of the body, to facilitate release and transformation of traumatic energy patterns. Color and sound healing gain potency when brought into water. In Healing Dance the body is moved through

sacred geometric forms, such as the spiral and infinity symbol. A body/soul held in the grips of trauma recognizes these inherently healing energy patterns as it seeks to re-organize itself toward health. We've often seen our partners spontaneously move their bodies into these geometric patterns when given the space to do so and come out of the movement into a calm and peaceful state of being—another layer of trauma transformed.

Integrating Body and Energy Psychotherapies with Aquatic Bodywork

Small, uncomplicated trauma is often resolved in aquatic bodywork without the practitioner even knowing it happened, since talking is not common during sessions. However, when the client is in obvious hyperarousal or activation, or when s/he comes with the intention of healing trauma, additional psychotherapeutic skills are needed. As we prepared to train aquatic bodyworkers to facilitate healing from trauma, we examined how we integrate our training in various land-based body and energy psychotherapies. This examination evolved into what we call the SMART Process. SMART is an acronym for: **Sense, Meet, Allow, Release, Transform.**

Diane, a physiologist and clinical social worker for some time prior to training in aquatic bodywork and had extensive experience with children in foster care and hospital patients rehabilitating from neurological trauma. As she integrated energy healing with her social work practice she also studied the Hakomi method and recently various Energy Psychology practices. Inika left a career in developmental biology to practice aquatic bodywork and is a practitioner and instructor in Healing Dance®, and Watsu®. She has since become a Somatic Experiencing Practitioner (SEP) and studied other complementary modalities such as NonViolent Communication and Cranial Sacral Therapy. Our own healing from trauma, employing several approaches, informs and helps us grow in compassion. We are deeply grateful to our teachers, therapists and healing partners who affirmed that trauma can be a profound portal to healing on many levels.

As we describe the SMART Process and illustrate it with a case study, you will find terms for principles familiar to your field of practice, some of which are inherent in aquatic bodywork. As you've probably also discovered, there is quite a bit of overlap among the principles in the various modalities. We refer you to the literature in each of these approaches for more in-depth understanding of their principles.

The SMART Process

Who can be stillness, little by little
make what is troubled grow clear?
Who can be movement, little by little
make what is still grow quick?
Tao Te Ching

Overall Context

The overall context for all effective trauma healing practices involves that ineffable quality in the practitioner which is often called “Presence.” Hard to define, it gathers into itself those qualities of compassion, mindfulness, rapport, nonviolence and unconditional love. Ron Kurtz (7) refers to “when the client knows that the therapist understands,” to which we would add cares and even “loves” in the transpersonal dimension of the word. Note that Kurtz includes the role of the client in that knowing, acknowledging the client’s ability to perceive and respond to what’s offered by the practitioner. In Diane’s book, *Relationships that Heal*, (8) she offers a model from nature to guide practitioners into what it takes to be a healing presence for someone in pain. She defines the relationship as a *partnership* to reflect the collaborative role inherent in any natural healing relationship. The qualities we bring to the relationship container often transcend any technique and serve as the foundational principle in doing trauma work. Because of the intimacy of aquatic work, the Presence of the practitioner gains increased emphasis in the SMART Process and serves as the foundation for each step in the process.

At any point in the process, we can engage the client in verbal therapeutic dialogue to support what’s happening at the time. We employ the dialogue skills developed in our land-based practices and integrate them at the right moment in the aquatic session. Verbal intake precedes all sessions, of course, but often time is taken to allow for more in-depth history or response to what the client is presenting. An SE land session prior to going into the water, for example, serves to orient a client and provide the information s/he needs to more fully participate in the session, particularly when the client presents with a particular intention around a trauma. During the aquatic portion of the session, it’s sometimes necessary to talk to the client to help her stay in the present moment, support what’s happening and enhance safety. We often use the post-session time to instruct the client in skills to access resources available to extend the benefit of the session, like teaching them energy psychology strategies to use during activations that may arise.

Grounding, connection to Earth, contributes to the overall context of the SMART Process. It is essential that the practitioner be grounded at all times: 1. physically in our stance in the water and relaxed in our body, 2. psychologically able to maintain an emotional center, and 3. spiritually capable of grounding our sense of the sacred and expand our consciousness to hold what’s happening in our partner. When possible and indicated, we also work within each stage of the process to help our partners ground the experience into their bodies. This is understandably challenging while floating, but dialogue and touch facilitate that. We help our partner ground at the end of a session by gently placing their body against the wall of the pool and their feet on the ground, touching their hands, knees and feet. It helps them literally feel their feet on the ground and bring the healing changes into their body and life out of the water. Talking about what they experienced in the water often helps the client own and more fully manifest what’s happened. Sometimes, however, we allow time for this to happen

naturally, rather than disperse the energy of the transformation by immediately talking about it.

Within this overall context, let's look now at the stages of the SMART Process. The Process is non-linear, in that various parts of the process are performed simultaneously and in no special order.

Sense

We sense what's happening in our partner and ourselves using all our sensory and intuitive tools. It involves a deep level of listening and inquiry. Called *tracking* by Somatic Experiencing and Hakomi, among others, we observe the present moment experience in our clients and us. Tracking in aquatic bodywork uses all the same feedback techniques and ways of being as many body and energy psycho-therapeutic approaches. The difference, however, is that the aquatic practitioner is holding her partner in her arms, so the kinesthetic feedback is the primary, very available source of information. The practitioner scans her partner's body kinesthetically, feeling for tension, locked joints, relaxation, and collapse. We track response to movement we induce and in movement that spontaneously arises in our partner: dancing, waving, shaking, or unwinding. We may tune in to places where energy seems constricted or where our hand is drawn, as we saw with Renee and Hank. Heart rate and cranial rhythm may also be sensed. The practitioner looks at facial expressions, skin flushing, and how the body is aligned in the water. She listens to her partner's breath and entrains both the movement and her own breath with her partner's rhythm. She listens to her own body, feeling sensations, getting visualizations and tracking her own nervous system. Let's look at how this was done with Lois, a woman who happened to work with both of us in four sessions over a week-long retreat.

Sensing began immediately as Lois arrived for her first session. Her eyes darted around and she held her body tightly. She told Diane that a recent Watsu session she received from a man had triggered abuse she'd suffered at the hands of men as a child and teenager. She was still feeling activated.

As Diane began to float her she noticed subtle energy activation on the right side of Lois' body, and she lay very unevenly in the water. Her arms floated loosely, but her hip flexors were frozen. With every move initiated, Lois instantly assisted her. Diane continued to sense.

Meet

We meet what arises in our partner with compassionate presence as well as support—with movement, touch, awareness, color or sound, without needing anything to happen. The intensity of a constriction is matched, just enough input to help our partner know we're there and to become aware of what's happening in her.

As Lois "assisted" Diane in the first session, she first just noticed it, then touched her in a way that carried the thought, "I know you're here and

working hard.” and exerted just a tiny bit of pressure to meet the tension in her muscles.

Meeting is quite similar to the *Taking Over* and *Support* principles of Hakomi and SE. For example, I held Lois’ hips in their frozen position, not with the intention of loosening them up as a massage therapist might do, but to bring her awareness to the holding. With someone clenching her hand into a fist; taking over would be holding the fist so our client doesn’t have to. First it shows our client we are supporting her and second that she can let go of the effort of holding, if she chooses to. If she is moving herself, we help the movement in a way that creates support through water resistance, matching the rhythm and speed of what’s happening in our partner with the resistance of the water. Holding, movement or resistance to movement are often unconscious; meeting brings them into awareness.

As Diane placed the palm of her hand on Lois’ lower rib cage, over her liver, a grimace came to her face. She held it there without needing to do anything about the grimace but be present with it. As the energy knot that had attracted Diane’s touch softened, so did Lois’ facial expression. Touch and energetic awareness both evoked and helped resolve a place of constriction. Meeting and release (below) often happen simultaneously.

Allow

In this phase of the process, we allow whatever thoughts, impressions, emotions, movements and sensations to come into the awareness of either partner without judgment or needing for anything to change. We are just being present with what is and accompanying our partner through this phase of the journey. Tracking again, in all its dimensions, plays a big role in letting us know when to initiate another probe, facilitate release or just be present and follow.

In aquatic bodywork, we often literally experience what Ron Kurtz calls, *Riding the Rapids* as clients move through their process. No matter what the felt experience, we accompany the person on the ride, without trying to shut it down or rev it up. We have found, however, that movement in the low gravity of water is not only safer when riding the rapids (no need for pillows!), but it takes a lot less time and effort from both partners.

While being gently moved in the water to the rhythm of their own breath, our partner’s body will often spontaneously move into *archetypal postures or mudras* that in themselves reflect an evocation of experience. Hands will clench in defense or open in surrender. We saw how Renee drew her knees to her chest in protection and Hank became the archetypal innocent child as he cried in Diane’s arms. As we’ll see soon with Ceta, she would often seek the peace of the fetal position following an activation of trauma. These and a myriad of other postures are tracked, supported and sensitively and mindfully guided into release and transformation—but it’s important that the posture is first allowed to come fully into our partner’s awareness, to the extent possible. In some cases, these

postures indicate that she has moved into a non-ordinary state of consciousness. We've found it essential to be present and allow this to unfold as well. These clients have shown us how the organism knows what it needs in different states of consciousness.

In Healing Dance®, archetypal patterns and shapes are inherent in the work. The Healing Dance practitioner uses waves, a series of flexion/extension movements while walking backwards, which allows the energy to flow out the feet. The waves can facilitate discharge, the energy of activation discharging through the extremities. If this movement speaks to a partner's body, he will complete the movement himself or even take over the movement. The body recognizes the sacred geometrical forms created in Healing Dance® (spirals, waves, figure 8s) as it seeks to allow disordered energy to find balance and integrate with the system.

One client had a medical trauma from an invasive spinal cord procedure. During the session spirals spontaneously moved through her entire body. After the session she felt resolution of the trauma and relaxation.

With the intention of inviting unconscious material to surface, we might engage our partners in *experiments* during the allowing phase of the work. By initiating a particular wave or pattern, the movement asks a non-verbal, "what happens when...?" We can also experiment by adding pressure where we sense energy building. We often experiment with dynamics: fast movement or stillness, rhythmic vs. chaotic. Asking the internal question "what speaks to you?" In underwater work we are always experimenting with how long our partner can comfortably stay underwater.

In sessions with Lois, it was obvious with facial expressions that something was churning inside, that was reflected in how she both assisted and resisted movement. The energy was building and we just sensed, met and allowed.

Release

Sensing, meeting and allowing what's been activated in our partner often naturally flows into the release of the emotional and/or muscular tension held by the trauma. Release can be as simple as a twitch of a hand, a gentle unwinding, or a full-blown movement accompanied by vocal release.

In Lois' second session, with Inika, where she said she wanted to work with boundaries, she became aware of intense rage at the men who abused her. As Inika placed her feet against the wall of the pool to meet the energy of her rage, Lois pushed back, continued to kick and literally set off tidal waves in the pool, giving new meaning to *Riding the Rapids*. The resistance offered by the boundary of the pool wall allowed energy to build enough to power a release, like the rapids that move someone through the rough spots and into the quiet pool.

Even during release, we follow the principles of sensing, meeting, and allowing to avoid either revving up a process or shutting it down. We also want to avoid someone getting stuck in what SE calls the “trauma vortex,” the downward spiral into increasing activation. *Pendulation*, a process by which we help our partner move between a place of safety and comfort (healing vortex) and the trauma vortex can facilitate release without re-traumatizing or getting stuck. Done in a safe environment, this allows the nervous system to adapt and become a bigger container for life experience, whether it is “bad” or “good.”

In a recent session working with birth trauma, Inika pressed her partner’s hips against the pool wall to simulate the pressure of the birth canal. Her partner’s body arched tensely and he coughed as if expelling something. As she brought his hips away from the wall, his body relaxed and the coughing subsided. This pendulation lasted just a few seconds. The session continued with clear pendulations of tenseness and coughing to relaxation.

Pendulation, which often arises naturally, brings the client’s awareness to the activating and calming poles in sequence, the nervous system calms and the energy of the two can integrate into a greater sense of wholeness and connection. At the beginning of a session the aquatic bodywork practitioner may experiment with finding the healing vortex or movements that elicit pleasure responses. In Healing Dance this is called Relating and Mirroring—being with your partner and reflecting what you sense.

In some of the energy work Diane has been doing lately, the release phase simply involves a gentle softening of an inner image seen by the client or a memory very briefly held in awareness. Instead of “rapids,” the release moves from mere ripples to a calm pool in seconds.

Lois was very receptive to work with high frequency light, so Diane worked with this light by moving her hands around and off Lois’ body for some time during her sessions (www.thereconnection.com). Lois reported that during these times she experienced brief reminders of incidents of abuse, which faded away as quickly as they came, leaving her feeling the deepest sense of relaxation she’s ever known.

Transformation

At the end of one of Lois’ sessions, she had a vision of a perfect union between her and a man she’s yet to meet; in another she left with the sense that a new story was unfolding in her life.

We’ve long recognized that release alone doesn’t bring about complete healing from trauma. Unless transformed or repatterned, the nervous, emotional and energetic fields will follow old patterns when touched by stimuli resonant with the trauma. This is why repeated talking about trauma or emotional release alone

merely adds energy to the old pattern and we find ourselves needing to address the issues over and over again.

Following release, or often soon after meeting a constriction, Diane may see a particular color with her inner vision. This color comes to and shifts the energy of the constriction such that it no longer acts as a magnet for the triggering stimuli. The color may come as a specific crystalline energy; aquamarine, quartz or other crystals may appear in non-physical form to bring their unique vibrational qualities to the trauma pattern. Healing vibrations can also arrive through inner sound, like tuning in to a healing frequency on the radio dial.

An integrally trained practitioner trusts her intuition to direct when movement, stillness, pendulation is needed or to wait as a witness for just the right healing vibration to arrive. Each trauma healing session is unique, bringing together the best of what each partner brings to the co-creation of healing.

We end our discussion of the SMART Process where we started, with an emphasis on the power of Presence and Love to heal. Sometimes the toolbag is empty, the process is stuck and we are reminded yet again that simply holding someone in the space of our hearts is ultimately what heals.

Long-term Case Studies

We've had the privilege of working over a period of years with some clients whose lives were marked by multiple trauma from conception. More than all our training, it is these healing partners who taught us the most about how to help someone heal from trauma and how aquatic work offers its unique qualities toward that healing.

Ceta (as told by Inika)

Ceta arrived for her session with her head down. I introduced myself and only a faint, "Hi," reached my ears. She mumbled, "my name's Ceta," and her hand slid out to shake mine. Her eyes rarely met mine and long pauses followed any question I asked. With my heart touched and mind wondering, I picked her up into my arms.

Her body gradually went into spontaneous movements: her hand coming close to her forehead, fingers clenched, her lips pursed like an infant's. The movements were restless like tossing and turning from one side to the other in sleep. The movements became more intense when I placed my hand on Ceta's belly. After a few minutes she flipped face down into a fetal position where I supported her until her body became calm and relaxed. She surfaced. She submerged again to create movements radiating from her navel that looked like a locomoting jellyfish. Later, she paddled with her legs and arms, moving monolaterally rather than the bilateral movement characteristic of post-natal human movement. This suggested to us that Ceta was entering a pre-natal stage of consciousness. (9)

As the session ended, it was clear that she was making great effort to ground into ordinary consciousness, even with my assistance. When she finally could open her eyes comfortably she looked at the water, at the trees, a floating leaf and finally at me and smiled. Ceta said she felt so relaxed and safe that she “fell asleep” and couldn’t remember the session past the first few minutes.

The next morning Ceta looked at me and smiled brightly while engaging me in animated conversation. I was surprised by the change in the shy “little girl” of yesterday. She talked easily about common interests, but whenever I asked how she was feeling or anything pertaining to her internal experience, she would say she was “fine” and get quiet or deflect the question with a joke.

Over time we learned that at around 2 years old, Ceta was adopted by an American family from an Indian orphanage. It’s thought that she was born to a prostitute in Calcutta and given to a street vendor prior to being taken to the orphanage and adopted. Her adopted father sexually abused her, and her mother punished her severely, convincing Ceta that her normal behavior was abhorrent. Working hard and striving to excel became her adaptive style, and for a while it worked to keep the PTSD symptoms under wraps.

We treated Ceta a couple of times a year, because she lived in another state. She never said she wanted to heal trauma, just that she had a lot of stress as a social worker with emotionally disturbed children. But things began to shift when she developed a frozen shoulder.

Work with the shoulder led to more hints of PTSD: depression and anxiety, chronic exhaustion and insomnia, poor appetite and social isolation. Even though her symptoms improved for up to several weeks following her aquatic healing retreats, more work was definitely indicated. We suggested she see a SE practitioner in her home state. She traveled some distance to do so, but simply couldn’t engage in the verbal or somatic process. So, in spite of our concerns that Ceta receive the most effective therapy for what was now clearly PTSD, nothing else was working.

I often sought consultations about Ceta with the SE staff during my training. I tried all their suggestions, from asking her to try to be conscious throughout the session, to stopping the session midway to bring her out of her non-ordinary state. However, she reported being less relaxed than when she “went away” and didn’t sleep as well after those sessions. Today, as she reflects on these sessions, she notes what it feels like to let go, to surrender to what she’s come to trust as the part of her that comes out for healing.

I thought it might help if we videotaped a session where Diane and I worked on her together. As we watched the video with her, we highlighted the therapeutic

benefits of the movements that embarrassed her. We pointed out how her body seemed to know exactly what to do, even if we didn't fully understand it. This normalized it for her and enabled her to witness her own trauma activation from a resourced place. As she watches us accept her movements, she accepts them more herself.

Significant administrative changes in Ceta's work environment sent her into a deep PTSD episode of depression, anxiety and panic attacks. She was unable to focus or concentrate, sleep for more than an hour or so at a time, and wasn't eating. Compared to emails in which she usually wrote beautiful reflections of her life and therapy, her words were now truncated and sentences merely two or three words. She had lost her ability to work and function. We worked with her physician to help her obtain a medical leave of absence and she came to the retreat center for intensive healing work.

During several weeks of multiple sessions, Ceta tracked and scored her symptoms according to a chart we created together. In each of the measures (scale of 1 - 5 in sleep, anxiety, food intake, etc.) she showed major improvement. We also observed progressively less intense movement and increasing calm and joy during sessions. Ceta often came to the surface in an open posture, giggling like a joyful rather than traumatized child. She began to read books about trauma and relate them to her experience. We taught her to resource through breathing exercises and meditative movement practices that she could do upon return to home and work. She was able to return to work and continues to improve.

She no longer needs her medications (anti-anxiety, sleep medication) and is able to work with less anxiety. Ceta enjoys her life, gets together with friends, hiking and biking. She is much more comfortable sharing her internal experience and surprises us with her insightful, intuitive thoughts about it. While she still wants to receive water sessions from us, she no longer feels dependent on them.

After years of wondering if we were helping Ceta, other than offering a few days or weeks of relaxation, her recent emails reflect the deep healing she's experienced. After her last visit, she even began to remember what happened as she "followed the mist" and entered various states of consciousness. She reported geometric patterns on her body, felt peace and saw spirals of color. She has a new perspective on why she's attracted to working with children and feels she will understand them better now.

Ceta confirmed what we'd come to understand about working with people in water during non-ordinary states of consciousness. Given the containment provided by the water and the Presence of the practitioner, a body/mind can safely journey where it needs to for healing. Ceta takes herself through the body

postures and movements that serve to meet and release patterns formed very young. She demonstrates natural pendulation, taking her body from obviously painful sensations to calm, resourced postures. While this one case may not be generalized to all dissociative clients, the non-ordinary experience of being in water suggests a safer way to contain dissociation while engaging the self-healing potential of these states. Another example of this is Amber's story:

Amber (as told by Diane)

"Chronic pain," she said when I asked what she wanted to work on in our first session, "everywhere." It didn't take long for her body to begin to shake, her feet to go into spasm. Each touch of my hand seemed to trigger activation—yes, everywhere. Even though we eventually rode the rapids to a place of calm, I often wondered if what was going on with Amber was beyond my scope of practice. She revealed after the session that we had touched into body memories of electric shock she repeatedly and ritually received on her feet as a child.

After a second similar session over that weekend, I happened upon Amber as she sat on the lawn outside the retreat rooms. She looked pensive, but calm and said she had come to the retreat center that weekend to decide whether to live or not. The treatments convinced her that there was a way to move through the pain— someone could help. I shuddered to think she thought it was me. Over the next several years it wouldn't be the first time I shuddered, nor the last time she considered suicide.

Over the next many months our trust grew as Amber came when she could for healing retreats. She learned to trust that I wouldn't run away every time a body memory of ritual torture surfaced in a session, and that healing energy and love received in warm water could transform those traumas. My trust grew in those same powers to heal and maybe even my capacity to support the process.

That is until the seven year old showed up, then the teenager, the infants, the monster and all the other little ones who carried their own portion of the trauma Amber experienced in her life. Multiple personalities? Oh, I have no experience with that! The seven year old looked me in the eye in a way I'll never forget and said, "You do know what to do and that's why we trusted you enough to come out."

We soon learned that we had help. In one aquatic session, an infant personality came out and began pursing her lips as if she was nursing (She'd been starved in infancy). Just then a ripe fig fell out of the tree above, landing just beside her head in the pool. Shaped just like a nipple, I placed the fig in her mouth and she sucked voraciously. Release and transformation in one simple probe from nature! At other times when the infants came out, birds chirped or a deer arrived that I could draw their attention to for orientation. Trust in a process at work bigger than ourselves supported our ability to keep going when the going got rough.

We soon expanded our human treatment team, as well. Four other therapists at our center (including mainly Inika) eventually brought their unique talents to Amber's team. We occasionally teamed up two to four at a time in synergistic sessions that seemed to be as effective as that many individual sessions. Looking for still more help in working with multiple personalities led me to an energy psychology (EP) conference and an all-day EP workshop on working with multiply traumatized people with Dissociative Identity Disorder. Working in partnership with others and gaining new skills helped.

The monster inside Amber offered me a big lesson in Meeting. He had been programmed to think he was the embodiment of evil and that his job was to hurt and even mutilate the others in order to keep them from being hurt by their tormentors. When I looked into his eyes, meeting the depth of darkness I found there, I sensed what he knew to be evil. Oh, that was tough, but natural pendulation kicked in eventually with powerful light to allow a major shift to occur. Subsequent sessions enabled both of us to trust that power as he courageously met many layers of inner darkness. In three years of very hard work, he and the teenager inside with whom he had conspired to cause major trouble for the system made peace with each other and Amber.

Amber came to aquatic energy work following 13 years of continuous psychotherapy and several hospitalizations, some following suicide attempts. She continued to see her therapist during the first year or so of our work along with taking many psychotropic medications. After 3 years of aquatic work, she phased out all but two of her medications. The self-mutilation ended and she was able to handle a part-time job for the first time in years. She began training to become a nurse midwife, demonstrated an amazing ability to responsibly manage family crises and formed a supportive social network. Many personalities have since integrated into few. They now demonstrate patience and cooperation with each other as they continue to meet the healing challenges they face. Problem free? Not yet, but they now understand the process and I trust they will continue to grow and heal.

Of course, much can be said about Amber's healing process and my experience with it. As I reflect on our work together, I see how all the principles and practices we outlined in the SMART Process wove together to facilitate her healing. Some highlights stand out, however.

I learned that carrying more than one personality in a single body is more of a skillful adaptation to an impossible situation than it is pathology. I remember the insight that came to me as we concluded one session. "This woman isn't sick," I realized, "she's a Bodhisattva." (In Buddhist tradition a Bodhisattva is an enlightened being who chooses to return to Earth to transform suffering.) Her radiance was palpable, her ability to transform pain with healing light unmatched by anyone I'd worked with. I can't overemphasize the impact of that awareness

on the quality of the healing container we formed. She had to be able to feel in my presence that I saw her as gifted rather than “sick.” In the times I backed away out of my own fear, she felt that too, which led me to my own inner work with fear.

Amber challenged everything I had learned in my training about working with people in non-ordinary or dissociative states of consciousness. As each alter arrived for its turn to be held in the nurture of the water, how could I deny that experience of water, energy and caring in order to try to help her ground or engage only the host personality? In that present moment that part of the body system was in trauma and I trusted the qualities of water and heart to bring her through it, even when my intellect was arguing otherwise. I became increasingly comfortable with the natural pendulation each personality was capable of, how they inherently knew when it was time for the next layer to present itself for healing. While we engaged our training and skills in the work, all of us who worked with Amber soon appreciated that we could consciously engage each personality in the process as they appeared without feeling the need to control the situation. We could responsibly sense and meet the personality that was presenting and observed how the functioning of the whole system improved as the wounded places of each alter surrendered to the water’s flow. Even though it often took some time, Amber eventually came back to herself, grounding in present time.

Of course, we encountered many boulders in the rapids of Amber’s healing process, boulders that threatened to send us all floundering in the rapids without life preservers. The SMART Process served as our raft, however, often sending Inika and I to each other and our therapists to be taken SMARTly through our own activation of trauma.

Amber tells us that water made all the difference in her healing compared with all the other approaches she’s tried. Coupled with the Love she felt from us, the safety and warmth of the water made it possible for her to enter places of trauma more deeply than ever before, and the healing light naturally followed.

“Of all the elements, the Sage should take Water as his preceptor..”

—Tao Cheng

Those of us who want to help people in trauma do well to take Water as our preceptor. We can meet the fear evoked by trauma with the consciousness that water ebbs and flows, yields and conquers, and finds its way around hard things while eroding them. Our work with Ceta and Amber highlights the degree to which the nature of water itself guides our work. When we move against the flow of water, we create turbulence. If we work *with* what is evoked in water, the inner turbulence of our partners finds calm. How does the vibrational field established

by healing partners in water affect the vibrational field of the inner waters of the partners? As we witness the transformational healing our partners experience, we have an idea of the answers to those questions. However, as “recovering scientists” we wonder how research would answer these and other questions.

Research and the opportunity to step into the waters to heal trauma

We are intrigued and beguiled by what happens in an aquatic bodywork session for healing trauma. Questions that we have raised are: What happens to the brain and heart during an AB session? Compared to a land based session? How does the vibrational field of the water and the healing partners change during and following a session? Dr. Gary Schwarz at the University of AZ has measured changes in bottles of water placed in rooms where Reconnective Healing® is happening. Dr. Masaru Emoto has photographed the crystalline forms of water when charged with thoughts and feelings. Dr. Van der Kolk and researchers at the HearthMath Institute have separately studied the effects of various practices on the heart and brain. If these questions intrigue you and you have access to resources (skills and money) we invite you to join us in the investigation of these questions.

With thousands of veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan with symptoms of trauma, we want to offer this profound work to them. Research demonstrating the effectiveness of aquatic bodywork and teams of integrally trained therapists can help this happen. We are offering training for somatic practitioners and therapists to learn aquatic bodywork as an adjunct to their practice. The next class starts in November, 2010. This 25-hour class covers the basics of holding and supporting someone in the water, some basic movements and energy principles. In another class the basics of taking someone underwater will be covered. These classes are taught in the context of healing trauma.

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