

THE BIOENERGETICS OF A HEALTHY SOCIETY

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Introduction

I would like to express my appreciation for the opportunity to explore the ideas and concepts of Wilhelm Reich and Alexander Lowen. Too often in a world functioning as though detached from reality, important discussions and issues are not heard or seen. This circumstance has come to pervade our modern developed societies.

These issues all have to do with freedom from control, exploitation, and manipulation of thoughts, beliefs, emotions, and behavior. As technology has greatly expanded and leveraged power: financial, economic, political and military, it has exacerbated, as I shall demonstrate, a mis-use of power that is detached from and in denial of nature's order, becoming wasteful, self-defeating, and self-destructive.

While irrational behaviors cannot be satisfactorily explained in rational terms, such behaviors may be understood in energetic terms. I will also show how the "mind-body split", an little recognized affliction, is fundamental to societal dysfunction. I will discuss how energetic functions in populations (organizations of individuals) parallel, or are functionally identical to, energetic processes in individuals. The dysfunction in the culture enables the dysfunction in the individual and vice versa.

Brief History: Freud, Reich and Lowen

To better understand the energetic perspective, and the mind-body split, a

brief review of the history of Bioenergetics will be helpful. I will begin with Sigmund Freud's concepts of sexual libido as the motive force, or energy, that drives our internal experience of thought, feelings, emotions, and behaviors.

Freud developed a working hypothesis that lack of sexual fulfillment led to neurosis. Freud's explorations began charting the invisible regions of the human unconscious. The interplay of conscious cognitive awareness with unconscious motivations is the basis of psychoanalysis. Freud's mode of therapy probed unconscious motivations verbally, by the analysis of words (although informed by his intuition and feelings), to discern the conflicts existing below consciousness. From his free association techniques, it became apparent there was a great deal of resistance to relating verbally emotionally charged, or energetically excited, subject areas. Discovery of "resistance" led to the concepts of repression and transference. Freud knew the conscious mind was more problem than solution.

Wilhelm Reich, a young medical doctor was a student of Freud from about 1919 in Vienna. Reich expanded Freud's early work with psychoanalysis, especially with regards to energy and sexuality. Over a 30-year period, Reich "gave birth" to Body Psychotherapy, in my opinion. In his psychoanalytic patients, Reich recognized disruptions in their breathing when they began speaking of emotionally charged experiences. From this, Reich developed a physiological understanding of the wave of energy that characterizes healthy breathing, and healthy sexuality ... 'the respiratory wave'. Reich increasingly focused on the functioning of the whole human organism, rather than on the mere treatment of symptoms.

In addition to his psychoanalytic work, Reich was a prolific researcher. Microscopic studies of various life forms led to understand that life is fundamentally pulsatory: expansion follows contraction, and vice versa. Further, he correlated expansion with pleasure and a reaching out to engage the world; conversely contraction is associated with fear, anxiety, and withdrawal from the world.

Reich's work on personality and character culminated in his classic (1933) work "Character Analysis." In 1934, Reich introduced the concept of character armoring, which is the bodily expression of mental attitudes, manifested in chronically tense musculature. Reich incorporated his understanding of the physiology of human development associated with the successively maturing energetic impulses: oral, anal, and genital. In short, the

character types (with unlimited variability of individual expression), are the outcome of when, with who, how, and with what intensity and frequency a child experiences an obstacle, and subsequent frustration in its' attempts to fulfill its' needs: initially for warmth, contact, nourishment and love; later for freedom of movement, self-expression, and still love. The formation of the character structure was initially an appropriate contracting and protecting response to pain or fear. The resulting chronically tense musculature of later life is the character armoring, in effect "frozen energy."

Finally, in the context of this discussion on society, it is important to consider the experiences of Freud and Reich as these hold clues to our challenge today. In 1919, psychoanalysis was trying to understand that "neurotic" disturbances were created as the individual's attempts to adjust themselves to society. It was implicit in the early years of psychoanalysis that individuals and society were in conflict: that is, society was partly responsible for individual dysfunction. The fact that Freud and Reich considered the drives to be fundamentally sexual made the implied critique of society unacceptable and threatening on an unconscious level. The unexplained rejection and hostility towards such discussions were a symptom of what Reich would later refer to as the "emotional plague."

There was so much reaction from mainstream society that it caused the psychoanalysts (and Freud in particular) to adjust his ideas to become more acceptable: ideas that put the onus of emotional disturbance and illness onto the shoulders of the individual, thus rendering society guiltless.

Reich, on the other hand, never compromised. He was critical of society, and eventually most organizations, because he came to see human organization as being neurotically structured, reflecting the neurosis of the individuals. Although he never apparently hurt anyone, his efforts to understand and mitigate the dysfunction of societies and organizations resulted in his exclusion from professional and political groups in Austria, Germany, Denmark, and Norway. Finally, in America, his books were burned and he died in prison.

My father, Alexander Lowen began his work in psychotherapy with Reich in New York in 1942. As an early student/client/therapist trained by Reich, Lowen developed his ideas into a new form of therapy based on direct therapeutic bodywork, which he called Bioenergetic Analysis. Lowen published his first book in 1958, "The Physical Dynamics of Character Structure," now titled "Language of the Body". Written for professional clinicians, he completed the study of character and fully developed the

understanding of energetic processes. It is significant that his characterology has not materially changed since 1958.

Lowen was a tireless clinician, author and educator demonstrating the therapeutic value of direct bodywork. With approximately 100,000 clinical hours over 50 years, Lowen was first to discover and utilize the technique of “grounding” in therapy, as a significant aspect of the totality of the organism. While other ‘shrinks’ were examining heads, Lowen was getting his patients on their feet and bending back over the breathing stool.

Grounding is one of the three main components of Bioenergetic bodywork. Lowen broadened and deepened Reich’s work with breathing, and expanded the use of vibrations (energetic streamings) in Bioenergetics. Along with characterology, Lowen used grounding, breathing, and vibration to understand the energetic processes that restrict emotional and behavioral health and limit a patient’s aliveness. By observing a patient’s ability or difficulty in movement and physical expression, and the structure and quality of the patient’s bodily features, Lowen could diagnose, treat, and monitor the therapeutic progress of his patients.

Unlike Reich, Lowen had no need to challenge the culture. He had seen Reich’s unsatisfactory attempts to mitigate societal dysfunction. However, he has also been highly critical of modern society: he said several times, “I wouldn’t give 2 cents for the future of this culture”. He wisely believed that he could do nothing to affect the culture - beyond his writing and his work with individuals. He formed The [International] Institute for Bioenergetic Analysis [IIBA] and hoped a movement might emerge to challenge the craziness in the culture.

Therapeutically Lowen developed a wide array of techniques and understanding to help people gain their aliveness, and find pleasure, contentment, and fulfillment. Sociologically, I believe the most important understanding to come from the Bioenergetic work is a condition known as the “mind-body split”.

The Mind-Body Split

While the mind-body split is little recognized, and does not really exist in mainstream thinking, it is a wide-spread affliction. Few people have an idea of the extent to which we live in our heads; that is, to what degree we live with over-charged egos at the expense of the more emotional life of the body, and how that imbalance affects our behavior individually and collectively.

The evidence that it is widespread is the increasing irrational, wasteful and self-destructive behavior that pervades modern culture. Irrational behavior is fueled by energetic over-stimulation without any satisfactory means to discharge or release the energy, leading to a deadening effect in order to tolerate the over-charge. When energy is diminished, or blocked and bound, sensory perception, feeling, and the ability to connect and engage is reduced. The diminished available energy is channeled to the mind, while the body’s aliveness, feeling, and perception is deadened along with the pain of loneliness, boredom, disconnection, insecurity and fear.

In a culture where the ego values of wealth, power, status, and image are touted, sexuality becomes distorted and is employed to stimulate, but not to fulfill, needs and desires. Commercial interests seduce and stimulate people to spend their time and money in a virtual world, rather than the real world. Stimulation of desire or fear without fulfillment, or release and healthy discharge, has become the principal marketing strategy of a consumer society. It is a vicious cycle of stimulation and deadening. The need for greater and greater stimulation is necessary to overcome the increasing deadening effect.

If the mind is over-charged with an under-charged body, a person’s self-image is disconnected from their bodily self. Illusions, rationalizations, lies, and the need to control tend to proliferate. This state leads to justification of irrational behavior; inability to accurately assess reality; creation and perpetuation of illusions; substitution of ideologies for practical solutions; denial of truth and acceptance of lies; and destructive conflict instead of collaboration and resolution.

Additionally, it is widely considered that modern culture is narcissistic; only recently people are realizing that it has become alarmingly psychopathic. It is an energetic function that causes psychopathic individuals to seek out positions of power. When successful, they are materially rewarded by the culture; enabled and celebrated by a media which itself is narcissistic and psychopathic.

Psychopathic individuals need to use control and manipulation to demonstrate and prove their superiority. This arises as a reaction to un-met needs and frustrations as a child. It explains the exaggerated sense of entitlement and greed that characterizes much institutional and corporate behavior. It is this characteristic that has - in part - created economic inequality, rationalizes environmental destruction for economic gain, respects

no interests outside self-interest, and replaces humility, connectedness and empathy with self-centered-ness, arrogance and dominance.

Psychopathic characters exemplify how character types respond to, and in turn affect society. In a similar way, oral, masochistic, rigid and schizoid character types are shaped by, and shape, society. The mind-body split is not character specific. It afflicts all types to greater or lesser degrees and quality, but an energetic detachment of the mind from the body is common, and is Homo Sapiens' Achilles' Heel.

Energetic parallels between individuals and society are numerous. It is interesting to consider that such a small portion of the population controls so much wealth and economic activity while the majority of the US population struggles with healthcare, education, and a high cost of living. This is reflective of our over-charged ego, in contrast to the subjective feeling of life of our bodies. For too many people, the body is merely a troublesome object that needs to be shaped and conditioned to fit the ego's self image. In society, the middle class has become an unimportant tool for the wealthy and powerful.

Another parallel is neurosis. In an individual, neurosis is characterized by unresolved internal conflicts, producing an inability to respond appropriately and spontaneously to circumstances. In contrast to health, neurosis limits expression and behavior as old fears operate within the unconscious. Often, as the disturbance strengthens, mobility, motility and effective action is reduced as the organism becomes more rigid: an effect of the deadening reaction.

I contend that societies can also experience nearly identical processes. Speaking of my own country, the US, we are so internally conflicted that if the USA was an individual, it would be in serious need of emergency psychotherapy. These conflicts, arising from confusion driven by illusions and ideologies at variance with the real world, result in a political stasis that allows only more of the same self-destructive activities damaging health, environment, opportunity, and life. In effect, we repeat failed policies and practices, while decision-making and action-taking is non-existent. Political and corporate leaders operate within a systemic structure that has come to serve only to perpetuate itself. The vibrant growth that created it is gone, and we are left only with a rigidified structure: wasteful, expensive and non-responsive.

To further the parallel, I am afraid that conscious constructive change will be impossible without some form of breakdown. Just as it is impossible

for a neurotic individual to treat himself, society either needs a competent "Therapist in Chief", or it will breakdown as illusions collide with reality ... a process that is already happening. As for an individual, a widespread collapse or breakdown may shock society into facing some of its more serious conflicts, illusions, and realities. Certainly, increasing numbers of people respond more appropriately, searching for practical solutions, as small breakdowns occur.

It is fascinating to view contemporary events, and history through the lens of Reich's work and concepts. Our external structures: social organizations, transportation and information systems, reflect our internal structures. War and conflict are energetic processes that probably have more similarities to disease and inflammation than we can imagine. For example, what similarities exist between cancer – a condition of unrestricted, run-away growth – with the "growth-for-growth's-sake" mentality in corporate business today? Might we learn lessons on one level that might lead to understanding and problem-solving on another level?

Being Connected

In his 1990 book, *Spirituality of the Body*, Lowen writes, "the subjective feeling of health is one of aliveness and pleasure in the body ... manifested objectively in the gracefulness of the body ... It is in such states that we feel a kinship with all living creatures and recognize our connection to the world."

Grace is an indication of health and connectedness. It is dependent on an integration of mind, body, heart, and sexuality. A person's body reveals how connected they are from muscle tone, eyes, breathing, voice, etc., and from its freedom of movement and expression. Similarly, societies' organization, attitudes, actions, and the culture it produces will reflect a position somewhere between grace and dysfunction, collapse or the "failed state".

To enhance your sense of connectedness and spirituality, the path is not only through yourself, but also through your body. The ego is the opposite pole from the sensory and physiological functioning of the body. While it's all part of the same whole, the Self, the distinction exists between the body and consciousness and unconsciousness.

Grace describes an energetic state that manifests as both a physical attribute and a state of mind. It indicates a connectedness with oneself and with the world, and reflects the spirituality of the person, the culture, and the society.

Towards Healing Societal Dysfunction

If you want to fix the world you have to first fix yourself. Reconnecting with your body, and understanding the dysfunctions of the world from an energetic point of view is a good start. That's when everything begins to make sense, but you may not like what you feel and what you see. The sexual control and freedom issues largely determine how an individual lives and how society functions. Sexuality is often seriously distorted. Some view Freud as a sexual pervert in intellectual disguise – many believe that about Freud because they are not comfortable with their own sexual issues. This is an expression of what Reich called “the emotional plague”. Control is maintained politically, economically, and spiritually, by exploiting this discomfort and confusion and lack of knowledge about sexuality. People like to think that sex is relatively unimportant, but a free expression of sexuality is fundamental and central to healthy life.

Another big challenge that we have is that, in the media, we only hear the voices that are paid for by the wealthy and powerful. The people are quiet and confused, but it doesn't mean they are powerless. You're only powerless, if you think you're powerless. Your power comes from your ability to use your voice. Voice is one of the important ways that we connect to the world. It is how we vibrate and resonate with others: using our voice is fundamentally necessary for us to be heard and to influence the world.

After 30 years of explosive growth in technology, we have seen improved standards of living for many people: many who were once starving are now eating; many have access to water, education, and employment. Unfortunately technology has also enabled the wealthiest to exploit the population while devastating the environment and society.

Generally speaking, these are all problems that defy traditional solutions. There is no legislative or regulatory framework that can properly mitigate these problems. Similarly, the school shootings, random violence and bizarreness of actions and behavior of individuals are also poorly understood by the mainstream. We can only intuit the nature of these problems: both technology and social politics are impotent in these matters. However, Bioenergetics offers a means to understand these phenomena: it is the mind-body split that afflicts individuals and is fundamentally the root cause of many societal problems.

Conclusion

The principle reason that I wanted to give this presentation was because I,

like many of you, have serious concerns with the state of the world today: how we treat each other and our environment. We seem beset with a myriad of conflicts, and yet the only movement made is often in the wrong direction. Typically the only “solution” applied is much more of the same.

More than in any other profession, psychotherapists have the responsibility to track their patients' reality. Other professions engage only a narrow part of a client's reality. Only psychotherapists have the responsibility to focus on the totality of their client's situation – the person's self – their whole being. Whether it's medical, emotional, or behavioral; or an inability to engage with the world appropriately – these are all issues for psychotherapists.

I think what tends to be missing in psychotherapy is a better understanding of the craziness of the culture. Psychotherapists focus on the individual and their ability to engage with the culture and the real world, but psychology and psychotherapy has not challenged the actual craziness of the culture in any way meaningfully since Wilhelm Reich, despite the obvious psychopathological affects. Psychotherapists have a responsibility to look and understand what it is about the culture that disrupts individuals, and conversely how individuals' dysfunctions can affect their culture and the society. The totality of the Bioenergetic approach is necessary and brings a fundamental understanding of the energetic dynamics that shape our social environment. It is the first step towards healing; but, with this understanding, we must also speak up. We are not powerless.

Presenter

Frederic Lowen, son of Alexander Lowen, is the Executive Director of The Alexander Lowen Foundation, and Manager of LowenCorp Publishing, holding the Lowen copyrights. From his long-term and close association with Alexander Lowen and his experience in Bioenergetic psychotherapy, workshops and trainings since 1966, Fred seeks to expand the visibility, appreciation, and use of Bioenergetics.

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