

A Loving Presence

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As health writer Amanda Rankin from NOVA Magazine finds, the Hakomi Method is a welcome new modality in Australia, bringing with it abiding principles of goodwill, kindness and compassion.

Hakomi is a Hopi Indian word that loosely translates into “Who are you?”, the fundamental question we ask of ourselves particularly during times of personal growth. “Who are you?” might also be the question on the lips of the counsellor or psychologist trying to help a client uncover the causes of their emotional anguish.

When American psychotherapist and author Ron Kurtz first heard the word in the mid 1970s, he knew it was the ideal name for a new kind of body-centred, experiential psychotherapy he was developing, and the fact that the word hakomi appeared in a dream made it even more prophetic.

“The word did come to someone in a dream,” explains Julie Murphy, Director of Hakomi Santa Cruz in California, who was recently in Perth conducting training sessions. “It was one of the founding members who had a dream and in the dream Ron handed him a piece of paper with the word hakomi written on it.”

Ron Kurtz just happened to have a Native American dictionary handy and looked the word up. The traditional translation of the word is “How do you stand in relation to these many realms” which, says Murphy, really fits the spirit of the work.

Using the influences of Buddhism, Hinduism, bioenergetics, Gestalt and the work of Wilhelm Reich, Moshe Feldenkrais and Ida Rolf, combined with Western methodology, Kurtz started to develop the newly named Hakomi Method. By 1981, Kurtz and a group of fellow psychotherapists had set up the Hakomi Institute in Boulder, USA and the therapy is now used by psychotherapists, body workers, social workers and

substance abuse counsellors across the United States, Canada and Europe.

Murphy was working as a massage therapist in Chicago over 20 years ago when colleagues drew her attention to Hakomi. She had noticed how many of her clients

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(Founder of the method, Ron Kurtz)

released their emotions during massage and she wanted to further explore the power of touch as a tool for healing and the connection between the body and the emotions. As a body worker, Murphy was attracted to the Hakomi belief that movement, gesture, voice and other aspects of the body reflect psychological issues.

Murphy is now a lead trainer in the Hakomi Method, conducting training in various countries, including Australia. With a degree in anthropology, and training in movement, somatics and Buddhist meditation practice, Murphy is an example of the eclectic range of professionals who can apply the therapy to their particular field. The method is fairly new in Australia where we have only a few certified Hakomi therapists, but many health professionals incorporate the training into their own work.

“Hakomi is still very young in Australia and this is only the second training we have done in Perth,” says Murphy, “but we have a good half a dozen people coming close (to certification) who are getting very masterful.”

The Hakomi Method is described as open-ended and flexible, and Murphy says it is continually evolving, absorbing different influences and ideas. This makes it suitable in all kinds of therapeutic work, but it is particularly useful for personal growth and transformation. It has also been effectively applied to athletics, parenting, and even the business world - any situation where the nature of being human comes into play.

“There are a lot of wide applications and I think its principles are suitable for everyone,” says Murphy. “Over the years we have trained a lot of different kinds of professionals. Certainly we mostly train counsellors, therapists and psychologists, but we also train many allied health professionals such as nurses and doctors, and even CEOs. All kinds of people who work with people.”

Murphy believes the beauty of Hakomi is in the abiding principles of goodwill, kindness and compassion, that are not only good for the individual's own healing process but for the greater community. While the workshops conducted in Australia have been geared towards professional therapists, the method is also used for personal growth training.

“Many of the workshops are open to the general public and we touch on the principles of Hakomi and some of the aspects of the method, geared towards how to apply them to life,” explains Murphy.

Hakomi is seen as a constantly evolving and creative modality, but it also adheres to five principles drawn from Eastern spiritual traditions: unity, mindfulness, non-violence, organicity and mind/body holism. In unity is the recognition that the other person is nothing less than a spiritual brother or sister to be respected, protected and loved. Mindfulness helps the client to drop their guard, lower the noise and stay present. Non-violence, in Hakomi terms, is not using control over the client and allowing them to unfold their own process. In organicity, both therapist and client can acknowledge the organic nature of the process and be supported by the knowledge of all that has come before. Mind/body holism understands that there is a connection between mind and body, and the

method is using this connection to search for habits and beliefs.

Central to the work is love, and the Hakomi practitioner must learn to cultivate loving presence and abide by the five guiding principles for the therapy to be successful.

“I haven't found another approach that is as gentle and respectful as Hakomi is,” says Murphy. “I think because it has a basis in Buddhist principles such as mindfulness and loving presence that there is a beauty that comes from the work.”

While the presence of love gives the work its beauty, there is also a structure for the therapist to follow. The first stage of a session begins with the therapist putting him or herself into a loving state of mind by focusing on the qualities of the client that support that state.

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This establishment of loving presence between client and therapist gives the client a deep sense of safety that enhances the effectiveness of the therapy. “We very much work from a position of love and gratitude,” says Murphy.

Once this position is established, the client is then encouraged to be mindful, to draw the unconscious core material into the conscious. This core material is composed of memories, beliefs and deeply held emotions that define who we are and how we react to everything that happens. By helping the client to achieve a state of mindfulness, this core material can be brought to the surface and dealt with. Mindfulness is central to Buddhist meditation, and in psychotherapy it is used to help the client uncover these deeply held beliefs.

“The entire Hakomi method falls apart without mindfulness,” writes Ron Kurtz in *The Hakomi Principles*.

“Hakomi is the method of evoked experience in mindfulness. No mindfulness; no Hakomi. A second aspect of mindfulness is its sensitivity and vulnerability. By quieting the mind and dropping one’s management behaviour (sometimes called defences), one makes oneself deliberately vulnerable.”

Anyone who has unsuccessfully “tried” to meditate knows how difficult it is to reach a state of mindfulness but, in a Hakomi session, the client only needs to sustain mindfulness for brief periods while the therapist conducts “little experiments” designed to evoke reactions to deeply held beliefs and habits.

“Many people come in having no experience of meditation or mindfulness and that’s not really problematic,” explains Murphy. “We are just meeting the client where they are and supporting them and helping them to develop mindfulness.”

Aristotle said, “You are what you repeatedly do.” Habits dictate every moment of our lives, and these habitual thoughts have been in place for a long, long time. Some of them are useful, many of them are not. All of them have become unconscious, and it is the Hakomi therapist’s job to uncover these deep, old habits, beliefs, and convictions, and help the client discover who they are by gently encouraging them to explore and study their experience of the world - how they perceive themselves, others and so forth. The objective then is to bring these experiences into consciousness, examine and revise them and hopefully create new, more positive habits.

As a body-centred, somatic psychotherapy that uses the body’s structures and habitual patterns to uncover the unconscious core material that shapes our lives, its therapists are also trained to listen to the client’s body and detect the emotions and experiences trapped within. Rather than just talking to the client, says Murphy, the Hakomi therapist will do experiments that will allow the client to discover unconscious material. It could be tightness in the stomach, a continual sore back or any number of physical signs that are sending out an emotional message. It might be the way a client constantly

looks away when speaking, which could be a sign of a deeply held belief that people cannot be trusted. A person who won’t sit back in a chair might feel unsupported.

“When we set up these experiments we don’t know what is going to happen. Then we invite mindfulness so we can deal with all the emotions and images that emerge.”

And some strong emotions could surely emerge, hence the practitioner must be mindful of the emotional state of the client and adapt the method to suit. “The process unfolds session by session, so if you are working with deeply held beliefs it might take several sessions because you are accessing a lot of layers,” says Murphy.

In a loving environment where the client feels emotionally supported and safe, hopefully even the most deep-seated negative experiences can be challenged. New experiences become possible and the client is then left with a template they can integrate into their life, bringing about real and positive changes.

“After that,” writes Kurtz, “the client needs support to continue exercising the new beliefs and building the new habits. The client also needs to practice the new nourishing behaviours in his or her everyday world. The client needs both therapeutic and everyday support for that, until these new behaviours become habits themselves and drift once more out of consciousness. At that point, the job is done.”