

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROCESS

RON KURTZ

Ron Kurtz is the founder and director of the Hakomi Institute. His ongoing input continues to guide the development of the therapy's theory and practice. Ron's thinking goes through a number of stages before becoming formalized in published books. The paper published here represents the freshness and aliveness of Ron sharing his latest insights with a beginning group of students. It is basically a tape transcription of a talk Ron gave in Eugene, Oregon, that maps Hakomi therapy into general systems theory, information processing, learning curves of chaos and certainty, models of health and disease, living systems, and dissipative structures. Ron values feedback and welcomes replies and dialogue on any of the concepts presented.

Therapy can be done, just like anything can be done, intuitively. Kind of stumbling along, doing things and getting somewhere. Not really consciously having a plan or a clear plan or a clear reference. The way our understanding of this process came about was simply by doing it and doing it and finally thinking about, "what are we doing?" Even this morning I spent an hour learning more just by thinking about what we're doing. It just keeps getting clearer to me. It's not like I had a plan and thought it out and then started doing the work. I was doing much of it long before I knew consciously what-I was doing.

So, I want to give you a feel for the overall process, but within the framework of: you don't just take the map and try to follow the map; the map is a guideline in a sense to what you already knew.

The process involves states of consciousness, very deliberately and precisely. We understand various states of consciousness and we understand 'how to work with each one of them. There are four that we use. That's one thing that became clear. All the time I was working with clients, I would change my voice and I would shift to a slower pace and the client would quiet down. But I never called that anything, til later. Later, I understood that, "Oh, yes, the client is now in a special state of consciousness", which I then started to call, "mindfulness". Or the child state. I worked with the child a long time before I really thought, "Oh, that's a specific state of consciousness." It has certain qualities to it that you can notice from the inside and the outside. So, we have states of consciousness we work with: ordinary consciousness, mindfulness, the child, as a particular state of consciousness and riding the rapids, which is more than just a mood or feeling. It's a mind set. When you are overwhelmed by the spontaneous expression of emotion, you are in a distinct state of consciousness, different from somebody who's meditating or who is in the child or somebody who's just making breakfast, which we would call, ordinary consciousness.

And, because there are states of consciousness, and because we try to use them in a particular way, there are also stages of the process. There are different things to do and an order to do them. If you're going to take people from ordinary consciousness into mindfulness or into the child or through the rapids and back into mindfulness, you have to know how to do that. There are different processes involved, different things to do. Each stage of the therapy process is different, with different purposes, guidelines and techniques and you have to know them. What's nice about our knowing all this is that you have this roadmap to learn the territory with. Then you forget about the map and use it unconsciously and habitually to go on learning more and more of the territory, as a never-ending process of working, learning and becoming.

At this point, I want to take the overall process itself and put it in a bigger framework. So, we know about the process in very crude terms, now. It has to do with consciousness and it has to do with different stages, like making contact and accessing and working with the child, etc. I want to put this whole thing in the framework of: why bother to do it all? (A basic question.) What's it all about? How does it relate to disease? How does it relate to health? How does it relate to helping people? So, I have to diverge for a little while and talk about some other things, including the notion of disease.

I want to frame this by saying that these are some of the essential concepts of the twentieth century. The concepts I present now have to do with the nature of the universe as it is understood by some of the best minds of our times, the most advanced physicists and biologists and theoreticians of science. These people are coming to a view of the universe which is very different from the old view we have had for two thousand years or so. Not the one the Chinese had or the Persians had. The one we had. It got us in trouble. We couldn't think certain things.

The new way of thinking has to do basically with what is the nature of life, what is a living system. It turns out that when you understand living systems, the universe seems to be one of them. And the planet. And each of the various ecosystems seems to be one. Whether you call it having mind or self or autonomy, if you can define a living system that makes sense, you find out that the universe, the planet earth, the ecosystems and even families, corporations, nations, organizations of all kinds, seem to have the qualities that define them as living.

Later in this talk, I want to discuss some of these qualities of life and I want to tie them in to the notion of disease.

The shift in our understanding of the universe is away from materialism, away from those models which attempt to reduce reality to the mechanical interaction of solid substances called atoms and towards a model of reality based on organization, growth, evolution, and information; less and less use of the idea of separate, independent solids and more and more focus on interpenetration

and interdependence. It is now about fields and waves and quanta and the like, as the atom loses its pre-eminence in a web of sub-atomics.

The shift is towards understanding organization, which is basically, understanding information, how systems use information. Psychotherapy, at those points where it is following the general, philosophic and scientific, shift, is also involving itself more and more in understanding the organization of experience and away from isolated individuals, with isolatable disease entities, like brain damage, genetic flaws, or single, causal, traumatic events. And, we are saying, these information processes are just as real as any atom ever was. In the old model, the only thing that was real was atoms, and their movements. In the new model, information is just as real. That's the big difference.

This new view suggests that therapy is learning. It's not just fixing something. You're not just putting the molecules back where they belong. You are teaching something. And disease can be a failure to learn, or a failure to know. It's now a matter of what the system knows or what the system learns or fails to learn. My favourite definition of learning comes from Fritz Perls. "Learning is the discovery of the possible."

I was watching a TV program on wild chimpanzees. The older chimpanzees are just doing things and the little ones are staring at them. An older one will be fishing for termites with a stick and a little one will be watching, intently, studying, studying the process. It is learning... "oh, that's possible and this is possible." And anything you ever did that had any life to it in terms of learning was discovering the possible. "Oh, it's possible to make contact." "It's possible to track." The big moments in teaching Hakomi are those moments when a student goes, "Oh! Man! Wow!" Something was right there all the time and they just found it. It's discovery. It's got that quality of discovery. That particular, beautiful quality.

This kind of information is pragmatic, it does things. It's not just lists and data. It has what we call meaning. It helps make sense of data, of the world. For the little chimp, it makes sense out of an old chimp sticking a twig into a mound of dirt. Information is more or less pragmatic, useful. Let me give you some bad news. There are no absolutes. That's the bad news. We cannot take refuge from life. In death, maybe. But, "in that sleep, what dreams may come?" Who knows! But, in life, there is always the constant balancing act. The most powerful information always lies somewhere between confirming what you already know and being totally novel and new. If the information you were getting did nothing but confirm what you already knew, it would be pretty boring. It's like having forty-seven clocks and they all say, six o'clock. Or, it's like living in Arizona and looking out the window at the weather. "I wonder if it's sunny, today!" It's always sunny in Arizona. Boring. Portland has the same kind of boredom in another direction. "Is it raining out?" Why ask?

So, information can be confirming and boring. Or, it can be chaotic. Exciting, yes, and meaningless. It can be brand new every day. It can be raining one minute and sunny the next and no pattern to it. Think of Chicago. Or, you've six dozen clocks around the house and they all say a different time. That's not effective information either. That's not discovery, it's chaos. It might be something like an LSD party, but it's not discovery. Those are extremes. Those are absolutes. The powerful truth and learning lie in between. It lies not only in between those, but it lies above those in the very act which converts chaos to certainty, the unknown into the known, confusion into sense. Chaos into pattern. Madness into meaning. Life lives somewhere in the middle. It lives between coma and convulsion. Between steam and ice. It is never at one place or the other. There's death at those ends. We live in the middle. We live in this place where we are constantly converting chaos to confirmation. We're constantly converting something new into something known, something we don't understand into something we do. It's discovery. We live at this point of discovery.

There are therapies which completely emphasize experience. I remember when I first got to Esalen, it was the credo, "Don't talk about it. Do it!" They were into experience. They were experimenting with strong herbs. They were Rolfing - five, six, seven Rolfers on one client. They were trying to get out of this terrible set they had of living in their heads. They didn't want any intellect or intellectuals. They were into, "Let's go have some experiences!" Well, they had experiences. Some guys had a few personal breakthroughs. Some other guys drove off the road and crashed. Some were killed. Some went bonkers. Some just went home or back to their old jobs and a whole bunch went back to school and got married. Their experiences changed them. It gave new meanings to their lives. That's why they were so willing to take the risks that sometimes cost so dearly.

It's like the pioneers had set out. "Let's go find the land beyond the maps." And they did. But, there's no point in going to the land beyond the maps unless you bring back a map. You have to use the intellect. There has to be this other thing which converts the unmapped into some kind of certainty. You can't just stay with experience. You have to apply the intellect to it. At some point. Yes, we get information by staying with experience. That's surely a lot of what mindfulness and Hakomi are all about. But, we also have to make sense and maps of our experience. That doesn't mean you want to convert everything at once into intellect, so that your whole life is just knowing. Then you're just sitting there looking at those forty-seven clocks that say, SIX. That's boring. That's all confirmation. You want to live at that point where you're constantly converting. Where you're constantly discovering. And learning. You're out there at the edge where you don't quite have a map. There's a map behind you and no map ahead of you and you're going along mapping the territory. That's where you want to be.

So, learning is the discovery of the possible. And when you talk about "mental illness", it's a failure in some way to discover something possible. It's a failure to learn. It's a stuckness in the impossible. The stuck person says, "I can't reach out to somebody." Or, "I can't feel like a good person." If we look at functions, stuckness is a failure to learn one of a balanced pair of functions. A person with a schizoid pattern can be absolutely wonderful at withdrawing. They can withdraw the energy from their hands. They can withdraw their minds from the situation right in front of them. I had a guy in class when I taught rat lab who could play music in his head and watch internal scenes of his own creation, all with his eyes right on me. He didn't even see me. He didn't hear me. He could be gone, somewhere else. He had a total capacity to withdraw. A marvellously developed function. But, he couldn't get back easily. He couldn't get here. As you might expect, he wasn't very good at being present or relating to people. He wasn't very good at making contact. He had one function, withdrawal, but he was totally out of balance. He didn't have the other function, contact. It was almost impossible for him to just be here.

So, we go and take the impossible, and with the process of therapy, we start to make it possible. We make it possible for the schizoid to make contact. We make it possible for the masochist to take action. We make it possible for the oral types to absorb nourishment and to feel strong. We make it possible. Our clients are learning.

The core of this situation, the focus of and reason for the whole process, is to help clients become conscious of how they organize themselves and how they feel some things are impossible. And we help the client try on some new possibilities and we support and nourish that effort.

I'd like now to talk about a model of disease for a moment. What I like about this particular model is that it is a general model and it's based on the new understanding of living systems. One or more of three basic things are said to happen in a disease process. One, imbalances occur. (In acupuncture, for example, it's yin and yang, the primary manifestations of basic life energy, that go out of balance.) Two, something toxic invades the system and isn't being expelled fast enough (This is germ theory and the accumulation of wastes theory.) Third, the system is deficient in some basic necessity, life force, or vital energy, vitamins or chi (in oriental systems).

So, some therapies are based on whether the system or some part of the system has a lot of chi or not enough chi, a lot of vital force or no vital force. There is something very real about vital force, but it isn't simply 'energy'. When we come to discussing living systems a little later on, we'll see why the vital force has looked like energy, but isn't. Other therapies see diseases as cases of the invasion of toxins or the failure to rid the system of toxic material. Something toxic is in the system, disrupting it, throwing it out of balance and/or weakening it. Those three things: the system is weak, or it's being disrupted by toxins or it is out of balance, are the basics of almost all medicines. It is important to notice that none of them is primary. Each can contribute or cause the others. A toxin can throw the system out of balance. A weakness can allow for the invasion of

toxins. An imbalance can cause weakness. They all can cause each other. So, the Great Medicine will be a combination of all medicines.

Let's apply this to psychotherapy. Toxins, for example. In Hakomi, the toxins are things like painful memories that have not been processed. They're kind of lumped there in the way. And at the physical level, they are represented by tensions in the body. Or they are negative beliefs about the self, negative self-images that truncate functioning, that keep the client from doing things and living a whole and balanced life. They are wasteful and destructive processes that we get drawn into. These things are like toxins in the system. I've already described the schizoid's difficulties with contact. The other side of that: the hysteric's difficulty in letting go.

Finally, there is weakness of the vital force. In Hakomi, we almost always attempt to nourish the system, like giving water to a thirsty child. We offer support and kindness and all manner of psychological nourishment. In this giving of nourishment we help build the strength and courage of the client. It must be done very mindfully to avoid encouraging weakening dependencies. I've seen many times in therapy, working with someone in an oral process, who in the beginning of the process is sad, depressed, defeated, and I'll be nourishing them, helping them learn to take in what's around that's good for them. So, you work on that and once they start to take in nourishment, they start feeling better. It feels good. A little while later, their energy level is higher. They have more vital force, more strength. Then, they suddenly start to feel their anger or they start to feel the courage to do something. We nourish first of all to build strength and courage, but it's also to teach, about taking in and what's available and functioning.

When the system's weak, we nourish it. When it's toxic, we want to go and get that toxic material. Sometimes it's core material and we have to bring it into consciousness and process it. And we want to bring the important functions into balance. When the person isn't able to do certain kinds of things well, we try to help them learn that. These aren't problems we're solving. This is more basic. It's in the area called, character.

Now, I want to talk about what a living system is and so, tie it all together. Some good news: there is a scientific theory of living systems, what it is to be alive. There's a mathematics of that, a chemistry of that. And that's wonderful. Ilya Prigogine got the Nobel Prize for his work on this, which had to do with what he termed, dissipative structures. Dissipative structures participate in and help define all living systems. These structures have the property of maintaining themselves. They get into a particular shape or a particular chemical process and part of their functioning is devoted to maintaining themselves. Life is that which creates and maintains itself. It is the "web that has no weaver". Life is that which goes on living, which maintains a basic identity, which resists being changed from this identity. Self-creating, autonomous, life knows itself.

So, what do dissipative structures dissipate? Not energy! In fact, all dissipative structures and all life must take in energy from the outside. They import energy. What's dissipated is entropy. They import energy and export entropy. Like the ecosystems of earth take in sunlight. That's the energy source. What they dissipate are confusion, noise, disorder. Now that's a little difficult to grasp. So, here's an example. There's a little earthquake and all the books at the local library fall on the floor and get terribly mixed up. That's importing entropy. That's taking in chaos. Now, the books aren't going to get up and find their way back to the shelves. To dissipate that mess, we have to import some energy, like a bunch of healthy, functioning people who have just had a light lunch and are raring to do some good for the community. That's energy. And they come in and put all that mess in order, so that the chaos is now gone. They have exported it. They have dissipated the entropy brought on by that mean old earthquake. To create order is to dissipate entropy.

All living systems take in energy and dissipate entropy. That's why the vital force looks like it is something from the outside. That's why it looks like energy. But, it's not just energy that makes us vital. It's also the ability to dissipate noise, chaos, confusion and the endless wear and tear. Maintaining, keeping it together, dissipating entropy, converting novelty to certainty, living at the point of discovery - these, too, are essential to life, the living process and what's called, the vital force. It means having an identity, being conscious of a self, an orderly pattern that's known and preserved, like the library books. It's about having a self, a consciousness, a mind. It means having an organization that's clear enough and clean enough to dissipate noise (and chaos and wear and tear and garbage and toxins and waste) faster than it's being created.

If you can use energy to create and maintain order, then you have the makings of a living system. If you can take the changes, the randomness "eats order" (as Gregory Bateson put it), the unavoidable wear and tear that Hans Se1ye calls "stress", the ever constant novelty that is our daily fare, and if you can process that through discovery and understanding into confirmation (order eating randomness), then you're a living system. Because, all life does that! And must do that! Each separate ecosystem on our fair planet earth does it. The planet as a whole does it. And, there's reason to believe the whole leaping universe is doing it. Right, now.

When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.

- John Muir.