

## **How Healing Happens (or Beyond Technique)**

I've been doing bodywork for 25 years. I'm good at what I do. And...I'm still learning how it all happens.

A recent session is particularly illuminating. In the moment it mostly seemed like any other session. But, there were little clues, signs that something extraordinary was going on. I could recognize the clues, yet it wasn't until the session was over that I could fully appreciate what happened.

This is a case history, but probably unlike most. A few days after the session I asked the client (T.) to write, journal style, her impressions. I wrote mine. T. was very excited to do this as she felt it would help her understand and integrate. I was excited because it felt like an opportunity for me to attempt a description of what happens in these bodywork sessions.

Editing has been minimal. I present both our versions of the session - alternating perspectives at similar times. Quotes are approximations not absolute. I offer this in full recognition that we have different recollections and perspectives on the same thing. Even had we audio or video recorded the session (which we didn't) it still would not be an absolutely accurate version of this event. This is a case of the classic phrase, 'I guess you had to be there!' But, short of being in the session, hopefully this will give you a general sense of how it happened. And if it resonates, you might find yourself exploring how healing happens in your own way.

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Kyle:

This is T.'s third appointment. The first appointment was an herbal consultation for cold and bronchitis prevention. A severe and lengthy bronchitis episode last winter sent her to the emergency room.

During the second appointment (two weeks later) we talked about and refilled the herbal formula. T. had a brief cold and successfully used the herbs to recover easily without it progressing deeper into her lungs. We followed with a bodywork session, specifically an abdominal treatment focusing on the internal organs. She was interested in strengthening her organs, particularly the lungs, so as not to be so susceptible to colds. T. learned a healing sound for each organ and an inner smile organ meditation. She seemed to do well with the abdominal treatment and was enthusiastic about practicing at home.

This third appointment is four weeks after the second.

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T.:

*I can't do this-I can't do this - I can't meet with Kyle and then lie quietly and smile down to parts of my body. I'm way too tense - I can't manage it.*

If there had been some way for me to cancel my appointment while retaining my integrity, I would have been gone. But I was having such an awful day - the free-floating anxiety that seems to show up each month was on a rampage. The changes in my life, which I'd been looking forward to, now appeared like huge weights which would crush me. Everything turns inside-out when the anxiety hits and even though I know it will flip back in a few days - it doesn't seem to help.

Then there's the headaches - tension headaches - which no medication seems to ease. Then it gets hard to sleep, even with the meds which usually do help. I'm in a pit, I even tried screaming before I drove down here - it was an accurate expression of what it felt like inside, but didn't lessen any of it. Well, my friend who told me about Kyle also shared on her blog about going to a session when she was upset, so maybe I could just go in and be honest about how I'm doing and if I really can't make it through a treatment, I can be honoring by paying for the time. It's okay to say 'I can't do this right now.'

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Kyle:

### **At the Desk**

After discussing the cold episode and herbs, T. started describing her difficulties with 3-4 days of intense free-floating anxiety just after her menstrual period ended. She was currently in that phase. Over the course of 10 minutes she had to stop talking three times as tears overflowed. From the time T. walked in the door, I sensed some tension - as if she were reluctant to be there and/or straining to keep things together.

As I asked questions about the anxiety, T.'s body language and facial expressions showed alternating signs of resistance, anger, strain to contain 'something' and frustration. I could see her struggling to answer in a polite and helpful way, but everything else was screaming 'NO!'

As I heard her replies and felt the underlying tension I noticed my own conditioned reactions surface: she's mad at me, I need to fix this, reassure her and make it all right. Noticing these internal reactions to her presentation allowed me to recognize them for what they were - basically fear - and settle in to my body, feeling for a place of groundedness with the Earth and speaking from that place. Instead of speaking from my fear reactions, I said it was okay to cry and let it out. T. responded nonverbally - no it wasn't.

I said it was good timing to have this, when we had a session scheduled. T.'s eyes glared, indicating that was absolutely crazy.

After several exchanges in a similar way and more tears in between, I tried to explain in general terms how we could use this bodywork session to explore her anxiety symptoms.

T.:

Kyle's nice and calm. He asks how I'm doing and when I explain about the monthly anxiety routine, he smiles and comments how good I'm doing to recognize this pattern. This strikes me as annoying but I appreciate the effort he's making to be affirming.

He starts to talk about how the approach we take makes all the difference. I'm struggling just to sit and listen even though I agree with his premise, my body is in such tension and pain that not screaming is taking a fair amount of focus. He talks about our approach to a cold and since I just experienced how the herbal formula completely relieved my cold and fever in a day, I do my best to relax and open.

Kyle:

From my perspective T. was obviously trying to be a 'good patient', to be compliant with my suggestions, but it seemed to run counter to everything she knew or felt. She couldn't quite understand how I could be positive about this experience and willingly want to engage and explore it. She challenged me to describe what the bodywork session would be like and what would happen.

Although T. probably wasn't aware of this, she presented just as much of a challenge to me as I had to her. Exploring bodymind dynamics during sessions had evolved slowly and organically over time. While I had taken numerous classes in theory and technique, how these sessions occur didn't follow any set systemized way. Responding to T.'s request for more information gave me the opportunity to put it into words. In general, I said something like this:

*During a session we can pay attention to the body and any sensation, symptom or experience that arises. At the beginning of the session I can guide you through a simple meditation/relaxation process to consciously shift focus from the external world to the internal world.*

*The process I use is to check in with the body and notice or inquire: What's most asking for attention? Whatever arises - a sensation, experience, symptom or emotion - whatever is current in the moment, is a natural starting place.*

*When we bring attention to that place, it gives it a chance, space to be heard, felt in a kind, compassionate way. With that kind of attention, the symptom can unfold in whatever way it needs to. In the*

*process, we usually gain some insight into what it is about and what it might need to heal, release or transform.*

At this point T. looked quite skeptical. I continued.

*Try to think of it this way. Imagine a young child, maybe your child, coming to you feeling the same anxiety that you are feeling right now. How would you relate to this child?*

I could see T.'s face soften.

T.:

I cried at several points and this helps me calm down. Now he's talking about receiving what my body is feeling like I would received a child who is anxious or in pain. This makes a lot of sense and I have no idea how to do it, especially how to be present to the feeling without becoming the feeling.

He says, 'When a child is anxious, you don't comfort a child by becoming anxious.' I know this from mothering my son for the past 14 years. I have no clue how to offer this to myself.

Kyle:

*Would you push the child away? Or tell them they were bad, or wrong?*

T. silently shook her head, no.

*No, of course not. We naturally, intuitively know what to do. We draw the child clothes, sit them in our laps, put our arms around them and say, 'Tell me about it.'*

*We don't even think twice (or maybe we don't think at all!). We'll willingly and naturally offer this kind of attention, caring and compassion to our children, our friends, our pets and our plants. But, somehow, when it comes to our own pain or difficulties we won't, don't, can't.*

*I call all of this: approach. How am I approaching this anxious child? And then, how am I approaching the anxiety I feel within? And if I struggle or forget, I remember how I would approach an anxious child and apply that same approach to my own anxiety.*

T. looked troubled. It seemed she wanted, maybe desperately, to believe this. A part of her knew it was true, but...

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T.:

Kyle's talking about being kind to ourselves. I've done a ton of work on this and made much progress but the pain thing. I've never really been good at being kind or helpful to myself when I've hit this level of pain. I do not understand but I'd like to.

Now he's talking about not masking the pain with medication but being present to it. Since I'm at a point where medication isn't helping, I'm open to another method. I'm worried about this turning into a counseling session. I've been through counseling and had a good result from a deep and difficult process. I don't want to reexperience what I've already worked through. However I'm open emotionally, in pain and Kyle's telling me about being present to my body as a guide and allowing whatever needs to come forth to simply be present.

I'm concerned that what comes up will be overwhelming and push me back to the origins of pain in my life-yuck. So, I ask for information about what that might look like - the things that come up - what language could I use - so that I don't get lost in the process.

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Kyle:

Through tears T. responded,

*When I focus on the anxiety I just get **lost!***

The emphasis on 'lost' carried a big charge of fear - showing just how scary even the thought was of willingly approaching the anxiety.

I talked with T. about how, in a session, I would be there, supporting her as she approached the anxiety. She wouldn't be alone.

*Typically, our most difficult and persistent challenges are that way because we didn't know how to be with them, resolve them on our own. If we could have, we would have long, long ago.*

I felt a little like a used car salesman trying to sell a car to someone who really didn't want to buy.

T. still seemed skeptical. I explained a technique used during the session, part of the approach to difficult experiences. I recognized how difficult it was to pay attention to large anxiety without falling into it, becoming it.

T. readily agreed.

I again used the analogy of being with an anxious child.

*When we approach this child, do we become anxious, too? Does that help?*

As a parent, T. was clear that this approach wouldn't help.

*It can be the same when we approach our own anxiety. We can come up to the edge of it, sit next to it, be present with it, without becoming it, without falling into and becoming the anxiety - as you said - becoming lost in it.*

Usually I don't spend so much time talking about a session beforehand, letting the session unfold in it's own way. But, it seemed T. needed some reassurance.

T. replied that what I was saying made cognitive sense to her brain, but that didn't ease the fear of doing it, the real fear she felt in her body.

When I suggested we try doing this, experience it in a session, T. brought up another question.

Just talking about her anxiety generated a strong headache. T. asked if I did acupressure treatments and might that be useful in relieving the persistent headache?

I took a deliberate pause before answering. Checking in with my body I felt two distinct responses forming.

One response was: 'Yes, we could do acupressure and it tends to be very effective at relieving head tension.' This was an automatic, reflex response. I'm very used to clients asking for acupressure for head symptoms.

Sitting quietly with that response, I also felt some of my earlier, reactions to her initial presentation: I need to fix this, I need to make it all right. It was as if some part of me - the rescuer, the fixer - was given permission by T.'s question to jump in and take over.

I felt the intense internal pull to take that direction as if that would solve T.'s pain and also validate me as a good 'healer.' The intensity of that pull really got my attention. It felt compelling - almost like following a craving - or even...an addiction.

Being aware of this intensity somehow allowed another response to form. It felt simple and natural, no force or charge. It seemed to 'fit' exactly - resonate with T.'s question. This was my reply:

*Yes, I do acupressure and it is often helpful for headaches. And I would like to suggest starting the session by internally exploring your*

*body symptoms without any acupressure techniques. Sometimes, the techniques can get in the way, be distracting to your own natural internal exploration. As we proceed with the session, if it feels like acupressure would be helpful, I'll suggest it. Or you can, too. How does that sound?*

T. looked uncertain. She agreed but I sensed a little let down that I hadn't accepted the opportunity to take over - to do something for her - fix this symptom, make it go away. T. seemed to realize that I was serious about exploring her symptoms, anxiety and headache, without distractions, without trying to make them go away.

I knew we were treading a narrow edge. Her fear of the pain and anxiety could easily team up with my conditioned response to rescue and fix. And I felt confident it would be effective, at one level, a very superficial level. This technique approach, based on each of our conditioned responses, could easily diminish the symptoms, but would probably not allow them to unfold and resolve their underlying roots.

Yet, I knew also that in asking T. to take a different, unfamiliar approach, there was a real risk of taking on too much at once. It is a delicate balance.

In the moments between moving from the desk to the massage table, I could sense the fullness of this fragile balance - unclear how it would precede and yet, confident in taking this approach.

T.:

Kyle cues off my question and reflects back that he hears I feel lost. O.K., that does it, I do feel lost. All the fear comes up and I feel unlocked and really start to cry. This demonstrates that Kyle is in tune with the unconscious messages of my being. I appreciate how rare that is and encourage myself that I am in a safe place and can be open to whatever may happen.

He revisits the original intent of my question and assures me I can be present without getting into the story. I'm happy to try something which allows me to be honoring to my body and feelings without dipping into the story.

Kyle:

### **At The Table**

After T. settled onto the table I guided her through a simple relaxation process.

*Let's take a moment to make a conscious transition. Let's shift focus from the external world...effort, driving, walking, talking...to the internal world. The idea is to consciously shift gears, inviting muscles to relax, noticing the breathing process and strengthening*

*inner awareness. As you notice your breathing, allow your attention to follow your inhale breath into the abdomen. With every inhale your internal awareness grows stronger.*

*With internal awareness we can begin with a full body scan, from feet to head, noticing any sensations or experiences. Without judging good or bad, without trying to change or fix them, just notice what is going on in your body in this present moment. Or, you may ask: What is asking for attention?*

T. responded well to the relaxation process, noticeably softening. She had three initial sensations in her body: tension in the groin area; headache at the forehead; stabbing pain in the upper chest.

*Of these three areas, which seems to be a natural starting point? Which seems to be most asking for attention?*

T. replied, the headache.

At this point caution lights flashed. Experience has shown me that head symptoms can be the most difficult to explore as it is so easy to move from head symptoms to the head's strong conditioned thinking reactions and responses. This was her first session of this type. T. was proceeding cautiously, maybe slightly reluctant. Her anxiety and headache symptoms were at their peak.

Again, my conditioned response to take over and try to control the session toward, what I perceived to be, the intended outcome was very strong. But, like earlier, the intense strength of that response triggered my curiosity. It was almost as if the intensity signaled my awareness and another response surfaced: trust the inherent wisdom of the body, mind and spirit to present (naturally) what most needs attention and in the natural order of it's unfolding.

Somehow my trust and faith in the process was stronger than the conditioned response.

I guided T. to the symptom.

*Allow your breath to flow to the edge of the headache in the forehead. You don't have to go into it, just come up to the edge. Allow your attention to follow the breath. Notice your approach to the headache, no need to judge it is good or bad. No need to change or fix it. Remember how you approach a young child who had his headache.*

*With your attention, softly and gently there, explore the edge of the headache noticing: size, shape, dimension; color, temperature,*

*texture; emotions, dreams, memories. Notice anything that this headache presents or how it expresses itself.*

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T.:

We reconvene in the treatment space and Kyle asked me to locate that part of myself from which I would comfort a child. Because of all my experiences with my son, that place is easy to find. I was surprised it was so accessible when I'm so agitated. Then he asked me to locate the part of my body requesting attention the strongest. Since my head is throbbing with an ache in the front of my forehead that's easy to identify too.

The pain is intense and tears are running down the sides my face. He requests I focus on the part of me which can offer comfort - it feels relaxed, strong and warm. Then I'm asked to see if I can bring that part to the edge of the pain. I hear the hurting part of my head say, 'I can't figure this all out.' More crying, I'm trying to be present and feeling overwhelmed by the pain.

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Kyle:

T. sat with this a few minutes then replied, 'I've got to figure this out. Caught in the grip of trying to 'figure it out' T. easily became lost in the symptom - becoming slightly desperate.

This was a crucial point as T.'s worst fear was manifesting: she was getting lost, overwhelmed by pain that she couldn't do anything about.

Recognizing this, I guided T. to find some place in her body that felt like a source of caring. The place she would naturally and instinctively draw on if a young child approached her with a bad headache.

T.'s body immediately softened. She put her hand on her solar plexus (top part of the abdomen).

***Here.***

*What does it feel like, this place?*

***Relaxed... Strong... Warm.***

*Breathe into that place...of relaxed...of strong...of warm....*

I could see T.'s attention dropping from her head to her solar plexus. Her fear response to being 'lost' in the symptoms dissipated. We sat with that place for a few minutes - becoming familiar with the experiences there.

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T.:

Kyle requests that I relocate the relaxed, strong, warm place. It occurs to me here that he's not touching me, he's coaching me in an internal journey. I'm learning how to navigate inside and this is a practice session with a trainer. That feels more approachable than a healing session where something is 'supposed' to happen.

Also, I like the idea that I'm learning something I can take with me and experience at home. So, I'm back at the comforting place looking to find the edge of the pain and be present with it.

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Kyle:

After a while I suggested another exploration.

*Now try bringing some of the energy you feel at the solar plexus...relaxed...strong...warm to the headache sensation at the forehead. Just to the edge. You don't have to go deep into it. You don't have to change it. Just allow the natural strength you feel at the solar plexus to flow with your breath to the edge of the headache.*

I could see T. visibly tensing on the approach back to the head.

*It might be helpful to imagine, visualize or feel this strong, warm, relaxed energy as if it were sitting next to the headache - like they were on a park bench. Remember how you approach and sit next to a young child with a headache...sitting next to them...or holding them in your lap. But, you don't become their headache. You sit with them, or next to them. You embrace them.*

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T.:

This time I can stay in the comfort and touch the pain - sit next to it on a park bench - gently, like I would with my child. Over some period of time (I have no idea how long) the sensation in my head shifts.

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Kyle:

T. becomes quiet and still, her body relaxing from the fear/tension response to approaching the headache.

*At any time you can access the relaxed...strong...warm energy in your solar plexus. Or it may feel like keeping one foot in that relaxed...strong...warm place while the other rests with the headache.*

T.'s whole body took on a different quality. Her breathing was relaxed and full. Her face looked soft. Her hands lay gently at her side. She was quiet. I noticed most the quality of stillness.

T.:

The throbbing stops and my awareness is drawn to the top of my head where I sense a green pool of water with a fountain in the middle. It feels very relaxing, soothing like a warm summer day. Kyle invites me to sit on the edge of the pool. I imagine dangling my feet in the water and invite any parts that would like to be relaxed to come join me and we can sit together and feel good. This is a very lovely and loving moment which seems to last for quite a while

Kyle:

These still moments frequently occur during sessions. Sitting within that stillness can be both incredibly challenging and rewarding. The challenge is to not interrupt, disturb or distract from the process. Persistent, frantic questions: What's going on? Are you okay? Should I be doing something? Over time I have learned to err on the side of staying quiet, trusting the process. Allowed its own natural course, stillness may provide amazing rewards.

After several minutes (5-10) I ask T. about her headache.

***Oh, it dissolved.***

*(huh?) What do you notice now?*

***Now I feel something at the top of my head-green, like a pool with a fountain flowing in the middle. It feels like openness...***

We explore that experience in a similar way, sitting with it and listening, feeling and noticing it's qualities.

After a while I guide T. through another technique that might be useful. Tara Brach calls it holder and held breathing.

*On the inhale allow your breath to flow to the physical body sensation or experience in your head. Allow your attention to follow your breath. Just make contact with it on the inhale.*

*On the exhale allow your breath and attention to expand outward connecting with the mountains, ocean, sky, Earth, galaxy and universe. Connect with the larger awareness - consciousness, kindness, caring, compassion that can naturally hold this body experience.*

*Then on the inhale bring your breath and attention to the body sensation. And on the exhale expand again to the larger spaciousness that can hold that body experience. No matter what it is. No matter how big or difficult or troublesome.*

*Keep going back and forth, with each inhale and exhale: local body sensation - larger spaciousness and awareness that can hold it. Back and forth.*

*You don't have to do anything. You don't have to try to change it, or figure it out or know anything about it. Just simply use your breath to stay in contact with both aspects: the body sensation/experience and the larger spaciousness, kindness that can hold it.*

*Without trying to do anything with or to the body experience, we give it a chance...to do whatever it needs to do. Grow, expand, change, morph, unfold in whatever way it needs to.*

T.:

Eventually Kyle asks me to conclude the work and put it down for now. Afterwards he talks to me about the fact that I'll forget this epiphany because I'm human. I've had this experience many times and it's nice to include it as a part of the practice - part of the learning is forgetting - that's helpful.

Kyle:

We practice this holder and held breathing technique for a few minutes. I check in with her and review some of the content, then bring the session to a close.

### **Back At The Desk**

T. looked like a completely different person from the one who walked in the door. Her face was soft, relaxed and open. Instead of being on the verge of tears, she beamed. The sensations of headache and anxiety were completely gone. She seemed amazed, a little bewildered. How could that have happened?

T. used words like 'life changing' and 'profound' to describe her experience. I could sense she was struggling with how to put words to her experience, but she genuinely seemed excited about a new way to approach body symptoms like anxiety and headaches. The previous despair at getting 'lost in the pain' was gone.

We reviewed some of the highlights of the session, reinforcing the process and giving T. some ideas on how she might practice at home, particularly the holder and held breathing technique.

As T. left I began to recognize what had just happened. During this session I felt so present in the process I easily moved from one step to another, just following a

natural progression. Afterward it became easier to realize the amazing, bordering on magical qualities of this session.

The beginning was unplanned and somewhat unexpected. There were key moments where either T. or I could've bailed out, taken a more familiar and conditioned response. And yet...neither of us did. A very natural, fluid process formed, guided by T.'s inherent body, mind and spirit wisdom - using her symptoms, headache, anxiety and fear as a starting point.

I sat for some time with the utter simplicity and joy of having witnessed, been present with and been a part of the process. Clarity began to form around exactly what these types of sessions are about. Hmmm... how to write about it?

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T.:

It's been three days since this happened. My headache has not returned and my anxiety is gone. These are welcome and exciting developments. There is something much deeper which has shifted and while I sense it, I'm not sure how to describe it. I could say life is easier or I'm experiencing more flow.

It's a profound shift and one which will take time to explore. Perhaps the simplest thing I can identify is I have within myself a place of comfort and healing which I've learned exists and I can access even in the midst of acute pain.

Just knowing this is possible is relaxing, even if I have much practice to do, it is possible for me. There is great hope in this revelation.