

Talk: Ireland, 2009

In its briefest form, I think of this work as assisting a person in their self-study.<sup>1</sup> The work is about self-study and it requires a commitment to that. The work is very different from work that's based on the medical model. I don't expect people to come to me expecting me to fix them. I don't diagnose a client and offer a treatment. That's not what I do. I work with people who come to me with a commitment to discover things about themselves that are basically inaccessible without support of the kind I offer. I work with people who are caught in habitual behaviors that are old, automatic, and which result in either painful experiences or missing available positive experiences or both. Being habitual, these behaviors are often not even conscious. For the client, they are just the way they're always been. And they're based on beliefs, memories, perceptions and reactions that create the world the client lives in. The roots of these patterns are normally not accessible to consciousness. A big part of my job is to help client's become aware of these roots and to find ways to modify the effects of these roots on what these client's are able to experience.

That's it in a nutshell. Now, for the way I do that.

Experiments in Mindfulness

I think there are three significant elements that make this work unique. The central element, the one that creates discovery is what I've called "experiments in mindfulness". That is, I ask clients to enter into a specific state of mind called mindfulness.<sup>2</sup> This state has these two particular qualities: (1) attention is focused on your own ongoing present experiences. Your attention is on your moment-to-moment experience. Attention is not engaged in storytelling or conversation or "socializing". It is following the ever-changing contents of experience.<sup>3</sup> It is not multi-tasking.<sup>4</sup>

The second quality (2) is this. The client is not making an effort to control what's happening (except to keep focused on experience). This element is passive. The quality of attention here has been described as passing from "looking-for to the letting-come."<sup>5</sup> Being in this state of mind makes it easy to discover your reactions to things. Being in this state of mind makes it easy to notice the sequence of events, especially the sequence of external events and your reactions to them. That's a method for self-study that results in discoveries. What's discovered are the beliefs, memories, attitudes and emotions that create your reactions. A reaction to an experiment is data, it's not speculation.

Data is what we want. We want a way to access the non-conscious material that's creating painful experiences and blocking nourishing ones. It's non-conscious only in the sense that it's automatic, not deliberate, unplanned. It's habit! This is not simply about repression, though in some cases that's there too. Just that the brain is organized to make certain things habitual so that it won't have to pay attention to them. Consciousness is limited and some things have to be on automatic so that consciousness can deal with the things that need attention. (4:08)

So, the first essential element is experiments in mindfulness. The typical experiment is done first by looking and listening to the person for a few minutes and getting some idea about what kind of unconscious material is organizing the person's experiences. Here's a simple example: Suppose the person you're working with has this kind of habit: He or she looks at you very carefully while speaking rapidly and maybe nodding a yes nod once in a while. Contrast this with a person who takes his or her time, looks away when speaking, and doesn't nod at all. Those are two very different ways of communicating. They reveal very different histories as far as communicating

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<sup>1</sup> New clients are informed about this aspect of the method when they first become clients.

<sup>2</sup> I have written about this as an hypnagogic state. It can be found on my website, [www.hakomi.com](http://www.hakomi.com)

<sup>3</sup> Read Daniel Kahneman's talk on this, especially Session Three, which can be found at:

[http://www.edge.org/3rd\\_culture/kahneman07/kahneman07\\_index.html](http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/kahneman07/kahneman07_index.html)

<sup>4</sup> Chabris, CI and Simons, D. 2010. *The Invisible Gorilla: And Other Ways Our Intuitions Deceive Us*. Crown.

<sup>5</sup> Varela, F., Thompson, E. & Rosch, E. 1991. *The Embodied Mind*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press

goes. I can imagine that the person who talks fast and keeps looking at you probably didn't have a generous amount of attention from other people when those habits were forming. He or she is watching you to see if you're paying attention. Talks fast in order to get the information across before your attention drifts away and nods to elicit a similar nod, confirming that you've been listening and agree with what's being said.

This is not an absolute certainty; it's an hypothesis about the origins of the behavior. The hypothesis is that this person talks fast because he or she does not expect your attention to last. The other person, the slow talking one, he expects you to listen forever. He probably doesn't care much if you're listening at all. He's listening! (*Laughter.*)

So, if I notice behavior like that, some indication of non-conscious, habitual behavior, then I will try to evoke a reaction that reveals that the client's belief is, "I won't get much attention." Or, "attention is not given freely." My hypothesis that there is such a belief does not require that the belief be conscious. It is suggested by the behavior. It is implicit and my thinking is only an hypothesis. The power of this method is that hypotheses like these can be tested. They are tested by doing experiments in mindfulness. I ask the client to become mindful. (If necessary, I explain what mindfulness is and I help them get into it.) When the client is ready, to test my hypothesis and to hopefully evoke a reaction that reveal the belief, I might say something like, "I have time for you." Something like that.

Typically, if my thinking is correct, what I just told the client will be exactly the opposite of what the client's belief system would have them predict. If it does, the client will have a reaction. It is in the nature of the mind and brain that when predictions fail, consciousness is aroused. Think of coming home late one night, taking out your keys to unlock the front door (which, without thinking, you believe is locked) and finding the door is ajar. You're going to begin to think about what's going on. So, when my client hears "I have time for you." the reaction is going to be something like disbelief or, as often happens with experiments in mindfulness, an emotion immediately arises.

That's what I want, some kind of reaction that reveals the unconscious material that's controlling the habitual behavior. Disbelief is exactly that. Even better is the evoked reaction. With either of these we are dealing with something real and something that's become available to the client's consciousness. If the reaction is disbelief, the client is now clearly aware that he or she does not believe that I will have time for them or attention will not be given to them freely. The client's disbelief makes that clear.

Had we been discussing the issue of attention, without the use of mindfulness and experiments, we might get very different results. We'd probably get something like a story about what the client remembers about getting attention. And, that may or may not evoke spontaneous reactions. The whole sense of what's expected from a therapy session could be different. An experiment on the other hand, one that evokes disbelief and/or emotion will bring a kind of clarity that storytelling almost never does. With awareness of the reaction the client will usually take the time to study the experience. With the emotion and/or the belief in consciousness, what usually follows them is a memory, a spontaneous impulse or a deepening of the emotion. Given any one of these, we can now go on to processes that will heal the pain and transform the belief system.

So, that's an example of using experiments in mindfulness. There are other types of experiments besides just statements like that. There are physical experiments and experiments using the imagination and other people.

## Indicators

Another essential element of the method is this: I, as therapist, have to be able to come up with hypotheses about a client's beliefs and history, based on my observations of the client's habitual behavior, habits I can observe, habits the client probably isn't even aware of. Those habits are called, "indicators". A habit of speaking rapidly is an indicator. It suggests the possibility of an implicit belief about attention. There are hundreds of such indicators.

When a client is sitting there talking to me, I'm looking and listening for indicators. I am also listening to what the person is saying, but I do not let myself get drawn into a conversation.<sup>6</sup> What the client is telling me won't be about unconscious material, because it's unconscious. Of course, I'm polite. However, I'm intent on finding indicators. That's the important element. Because I do that and because I've practiced doing that for years, I can find indicators relatively quickly. That saves a lot of time. I don't ask questions. I don't elicit explanations or stories.

I should mention right here something I ran across recently, some Daniel Kahneman's ideas.<sup>7</sup> Kahneman talks about two selves, an experiencing self and a remembering self. He makes a real distinction between them. The experiencing self is aware of moment by moment experiences. It is present centered. The remembering self, Kahneman tells us, is a storyteller. It reports memories of the past. Present experience is an example of how experience is habitually organized. It is very reliable that way. Stories about the past are not nearly as reliable. (If you'd like some good information on how reliable memories are, the books to read is "The Invisible Gorilla" and "Proust Was a Neuroscientist".<sup>8</sup>)

So, I work from and with the client's present behaviors and experiences. Memory is important to this work, but its importance is not in what the client tells us about his or her past. I'll talk about how memory is important, later in this talk. Although the two selves interact and influence each other, my goal is primarily to change what clients can experience. I want to help the experiencing self to be able to have more nourishing experiences and less painful ones. Those are my primary goals.

Using indicators and experiments in mindfulness allow the method to get into important issues very quickly. Sometimes, I can notice an indicator before the client has even said anything. I can see it in the walk or in the posture. I don't have to hear the story. I don't have to take a history. As Wilhelm Reich emphasized, the client's history is written in the body. It walks in with the client. Here's a quote about it:

*To [Wilhelm] Reich, dreams were no longer the cornerstones of therapy. The manner in which the patient comes to the treatment, his politeness or stubbornness, his mode of speech, his dress, the style and firmness of his handshake were all records of character. And character is real, it can be treated. Reich directed attention to this and away from the complication of content and free association, which engage and distract the interest of the regular analyst.*

*Since the Freudian unconscious was basically latent sensations and impulses in the body itself, Reich saw no predominant need to go back in time to the traumatic moment or origin of the condition. He wrote "The entire world of past experience (is) embodied in the present in the form of character attitudes. A person's character is the fractional sum total of all past experiences."*

*The doctor does not need to reconstruct a traumatic moment; the traumatic moment continues to exist in every breath the patient takes, in every gesture he makes. — Richard Grossinger<sup>9</sup>*

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<sup>6</sup> Refer to Psychotherapy as the Art of Not Having a Conversation.

<sup>7</sup> About Daniel Kahneman and where to find him.

<sup>8</sup> Reference The Invisible Gorilla and Proust Was a Neuroscientist.

<sup>9</sup> Planet Medicine

All the things Grossinger mentions, politeness or stubbornness, his mode of speech, his dress, the style and firmness of his handshake, they're all indicators.

So, that's the second element, indicators. Like the first, it's something you can practice. You can learn it and learn to use it. If you decide to use indicators, you must make an effort to avoid being distracted by the conversation. Don't get lost in the conversation! Reminds me of the poem by T. S. Elliot, *The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock*. The last lines of it go like this:

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea  
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown  
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

Drowning in "human voices", that's the problem. Drowning in the storytelling of the remembering self. Avoid it! Don't get lost in the conversation. Find indicators. That's the second element.

I call the third element, "loving presence". There's a great deal more to it than I originally thought. I want to give you another quote. It's from a great book on neurology by Rudolpho Llinás called, "i of the vortex".<sup>10</sup> It is subtitled, "From Neuron to Self". It's a wonderful book about how our neurons create in us a sense of self.

The waking state is dreamlike in exactly the same sense that dreams are wakelike.

He has also said in the same book, *The brain is a virtual reality machine*. That's a very important concept for us. The brain can do no better than create a virtual reality. The visual world that the brain creates is, for most of us, quite reliable. That is, if you're trying to walk around without bumping into things. It's not that reliable visually if you're busy with another task, even a visual one.<sup>11</sup>

The point is, as a therapist, I want access to that virtual reality. That's what I want to do. Suppose you're working with someone whose brain is creating a reality in which they are worthless. Or, one in which nobody could love them. Nobody needs a virtual reality like that. That's a terrible thing to be going around creating. That kind of thing can ruin your day, day after day. I want access to that reality. I want to help the person change what they're doing there. I want help them create a new reality where they're worthy and lovable. Which is true. There are people who can love you. Probably millions of them.

Loving Presence

Okay, so how do we access people's reality making machinery. It's not just the experiments in mindfulness that do that. It's something about the client-therapist relationship. Something in the client allows the therapist access to the client's virtual reality. As a therapist, you have to be a certain way to allow that to happen. Of course you can do it with tricks, like a hypnotist might employ. And some therapists do it that way, hypnotherapists. We know it's possible. We know that it happens with mother's and infants, with parents and children, between culture carriers and those growing up in that culture. The way I do it is this. I find something about the client that I can love. Or at least that I can feel good about. Something that nourishes *me*. When I let the feelings that arise with that, I am in a loving mood and that mood infuses everything I do.

I am also very much focused on the present, the client's and my own experience moment by moment. I am very aware of the client's and my own experiencing self. Plus a few other aspects of my present state of mind. I stay calm. I am patient. And as I said before, I'm focused on the client's present behaviors. In a phrase, I'm in loving presence. Alan Schore<sup>12</sup> talks about psychotherapists as "psychobiological regulators". One of the main ways in which I do this regulating is through my own physiological state and my ability to provide a sense of calm and

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<sup>10</sup> Llinás, Rodolfo R. (2002). *i of the vortex: From Neurons to Self*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

<sup>11</sup> Check out the invisible gorilla experiment. Reference. See also, Lehrer's chapter on Cezanne.

<sup>12</sup> Schore, Allan N., (1994) *Affect Regulation and the Origin of the Self (The Neurobiology of Emotional Development)*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.

confidence. I also demonstrate two important things about myself to the client: (1) I demonstrate that I am aware of what the client is experiencing. I do this by reading the signs that tell me that and (2) I demonstrate my caring and attunement. My state of loving presence provides a context for the work the client and I will do to bring core material into consciousness and process it.

So, those are the three central elements of the method: experiments in mindfulness, using indicators, and loving presence.

One more thing before I close. Once I have evoked a reaction, especially one that brings up painful emotions, I am going to have to deal with what's come up. How I deal with it is a topic I've written about and can be found on my website and the various papers and handbooks which are free downloads there.<sup>13</sup>

Thank you!

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<sup>13</sup> [www.hakomi.com](http://www.hakomi.com)