

Alexander Lowen (1910–2008): reflections on his life

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Alexander Lowen, founder of Bioenergetic Analysis, died on 28 October 2008. He was known throughout the profession of psychotherapy for emphasising the importance of the body in diagnosing and treating psychological problems. His legacy lives on in the body-oriented psychotherapy he devised, the 14 books he wrote, and the international institute he founded. Probably every person reading this journal has in some way benefited from his pioneering work.

Bioenergetic Analysis is a movement-based, body-oriented psychotherapy which posits that all trauma is rooted in the musculature of the body. Over time, these constrictions become habitual and prevent, as they are meant to prevent true feeling. Lowen believed that by moving and loosening, or exaggerating the constriction and then loosening the muscles of the body, the underlying problem would come into consciousness and then could be discussed analytically. He saw Bioenergetics as an ego psychology, growing out of the work of his teacher Wilhelm Reich, whose work in turn grew from collegueship Freud and the Freudian circle before Reich was expelled from the psychoanalytic institute for his controversial ideas in 1927.

Lowen was born of immigrant parents in 1910 in New York, New York, and spent most of his life there or in nearby New Canaan, Connecticut. He grew up during the roaring twenties and received his first degree from City College of New York in June 1930, eight months after the Wall Street crash and onset of the Great Depression. In addition to being a counsellor at a summer camp, after graduation he worked first for

the municipal government, then studied law, and spent the war working as a teacher in New York City.

Like so many, Lowen's journey from self-reflection to psychotherapy grew out of a troubled family and historical context. At a time when few people had access to a therapist, he realised from his own experience that physical exercise lifted depressive feelings. He first worked on his own, often at a local park. When in 1940, Wilhelm Reich, fleeing Nazi Europe, offered a course in the mind-body relationship, Lowen enrolled on it. He went into therapy with Reich in 1942 and eventually Reich referred patients to him. After the war, Lowen went to Geneva to medical school, receiving his qualification in 1951. He started his own psychotherapy practice with his colleague, John Pierrakos (1921–2001), developing together this body-oriented approach.

Lowen and Pierrakos often practiced on each other. Basically, Lowen brought into the consulting room what every gym instructor and every parent knows: movement and exercise results in deepening respiration which releases pent-up energy and brings about an enhanced sense of self-esteem and well-being. Ideas from exercises came from all over, from yoga as well as t'ai chi, from physical education instruction, from watching children play in the park, from singing lessons. I discovered for myself once, when leading a bioenergetic movement group during which I suggested people try to do 'wall sits', and a client said with some surprise (and to my surprise) 'This is what we do in ski school!'

Lowen and Pierrakos also realised they needed to differentiate Bioenergetics from the highly-controversial Reich if their way of working was ever going to gain acceptance in America. Several tenets made Bioenergetics different from Reichian psychotherapy or the then-prevalent psychoanalytic psychotherapy. Whereas Reich aimed to loosen muscular holding by working first with the ocular segment and then down the body, Lowen realised clients, in order to feel safe, needed to feel their legs in contact with the ground, so he then focussed from the ground up.

Lowen therefore eschewed the analytic couch and had patients standing up: he emphasised contact with the ground. Grounding thus became one of the fundamental aims of bioenergetic work. Lowen devised several standing postures, including a 'bow position', very like the arched t'ai chi stance, and a forward position with bent legs and a person's fingertips just touching the ground, a slight modification of a yoga stance.

With Pierrakos, Lowen did use a bed to help clients monitor and deepen breathing. Blocked breathing and unblocking energy flows became another fixed tenet of this psychotherapy. Lowen quickly noticed how a client would stop breathing, or stop breathing deeply, when facing difficult psychological issues. By working on the breathing, a person's memories or emotions, and sometimes both, would come back into consciousness. He aimed to help his clients establish and maintain an energy flow, an energetic connection between their head, their heart and their genitals.

Where this energy flow was blocked was developmentally-related and the underlying trauma was, Lowen maintained, evidenced in their body structure. Here he was building on Reich's work and that of other neo-Freudians. His classification of character structures, however, he made his own and, over the course of his working life, he elaborated first on the pre-Oedipal holding patterns and later on the post-Oedipal ones. He believed one could read a body and know at what age the person decided to constrict and mould his/her body to weather the emotional difficulty.

Lowen and Pierrakos used their exercises to help mobilise and energise their client's body, firmly believing that increased energy would make the person feel better and help to dissolve or bypass the energetic blocks. Breathing exercises and expressive exercises helped to do this, while standing exercises strengthened the legs and allowed the client to 'stand up' to the emotion and stand up for himself/herself. Lowen saw most of his clients once a week and encouraged them to partake in a bioenergetically-based movement group between sessions.

In sessions, and to some extent in groups, Lowen emphasised the expression of anger. For him, the ultimate bedrock on which most patient distress rested was not sadness or rejection, but betrayal and anger. He thus created a large number of exercises designed to help patients access their anger and express it: an early one involved standing in the famous bioenergetic bow position, making fists, and alternatively punching the arms back, shouting 'Get off my back!' Using mattresses, Lowen would encourage a supine client to hit with hands and kick with legs, and eventually Lowen would instigate a 'temper tantrum' exercise of both hitting and kicking the bed, while shouting 'no!' Indeed, the period of bioenergetic development up until the mid-1970s is still called the 'hit, kick and scream' era.

Whereas in the early seventies Pierrakos talked increasingly of spiritual concerns and transpersonal forces, Lowen continued to emphasise contact with the body and contact through the body. Not surprisingly, Pierrakos and Lowen went their separate ways by the end of the 1970s.

Lowen returned to his theme of anger in the 1990s. He required all Bioenergetic trainers partake in professional development workshops he ran, with the theme, 'Back to Basics'. By then, he was assigning clients homework of hitting the bed with a tennis racket 100 times a day. He also practised what he preached, doing a workout session of bioenergetic exercises, including hitting, every day.

Throughout this period, from the Cold War to the end of the 1990s, Bioenergetics as a psychotherapeutic discipline grew. The ethos of this form of psychotherapy, 'standing on your own (two) feet' and 'standing up for yourself', as well as 'having (an) understanding of' (e.g. standing under) oneself, fitted well with the post-war outlook. Encouraged by his colleague Alice Ladas, Lowen and Pierrakos founded the Institute for Bioenergetic Analysis in New York in 1954.

Lowen travelled widely, giving workshops in places like Esalen, and delivering lectures and seminars around the world, including here in London. Requests for training in the United States and from foreign countries meant that, by 1976, Lowen could transform his Institute into the International Institute for Bioenergetic Analysis (IIBA), with a training manual, a cohort of trainers, and criteria of proficiency. The Institute now has over 1500 members, and 54 training institutes across the world associated with it. The journal *Bioenergetics* is published annually with articles, research reports, and book reviews. Instigated by members of the Florida Society for Bioenergetic Analysis, the Alexander Lowen Foundation now organises workshops worldwide and, with the Bioenergetic Press, keeps Lowen's written work in print.

Indeed, for many, introduction to this form of body psychotherapy came through one of the 14 books that Alexander Lowen wrote. Perhaps his best-liked book was the first, *Physical Dynamics of Character Structure*, now better known as *The Language of the Body* (1958) with a close second being *The Betrayal of the Body* (1967). The most accessible book, until recently published in this country by Penguin,

is *Bioenergetics* (1976). Lowen later went on to write about depression and the body, spirituality and the body, and, after his own anxiety about possible cardiac problems, *Love, Sex and Your Heart* (1988). Other important titles include *Love and Orgasm* (1965), *Narcissism* (1984) and *Joy* (1995). His manual of bioenergetic exercises, *The Way to Vibrant Health* (1977), co-authored with his wife Leslie, still sells well. He wrote an autobiography in 2004, *Honouring the Body*, and a complete collection of his public lectures appeared in 2005, entitled *The Voice of the Body*.

All this detail can take us away from the man himself. What was Al Lowen like? He was at the same time generally considered even by himself as rigid and somewhat controlling, but also seen as generous as well as innovative. For example, he donated to the International Institute any fees he might have earned from the International Institute events, so that money could help fund the IIBA. He offered rent-free accommodation in his own consulting rooms to the Institute. But he would not, and probably could not, let anyone else be Executive Director of the Institute. His vision for Bioenergetics and for the Institute always triumphed over that of the Institute trustees and members.

His iron-grip handshake was legendary. Yet he could say and write 'soft' empathic things like, 'The body has its own wisdom. Accepting the realities of life and listening to the body leads to fulfilment' (from his autobiography). I particularly like his words on crying:

... sobbing is the earliest and deepest way to release tension ... Human beings are the only creatures who can react in this way to stress and tension. Most probably, they are the only ones who need this form of release.

As for knowing Al Lowen as a person, he was impressive. I met him several times over the 20 years from the late seventies until the mid nineties: he came to London several times and most notably gave a fully-attended lecture at the Friends' meeting house, Euston Road; he spearheaded a week-long training programme with his colleagues Stanley Keleman and Carl Kirsch in 1982; he was presenting at two of the international bioenergetic conferences I attended; he warmly greeted me in his office in New York City. I well remember his trim, almost ageless figure and his sparkling eyes. Alongside his physical strength and stamina, his mental capacity seemed to match his bodily aliveness as shown by his prodigious memory when seeing again Institute members and former clients.

Sometime after our last meeting in New York, however, Al began to age. He resigned as executive director of the International Institute in 1996. He lived through the long illness and eventual death of his wife and colleague, Leslie Lowen, in 2002. He suffered a stroke in 2006 before dying relatively peacefully, aged 97, two months before his 98th birthday.

His colleagues and friends organised a weekend-long memorial event in New York City, attended by Institute members from around the world. On the internet, a website of tributes commemorated his life and achievement. One such entry, from a British woman now practising another form of neo-Reichian therapy in Vancouver, British Columbia, seems particularly appropriate. Erica Kelley's commemoration quoted her late husband, Chuck Kelley, a student of Reich after Lowen, and originator of Radix work. Honouring Alexander Lowen at the first United States National Conference on Body-Oriented Psychotherapy in 1996, Chuck said: Al ... is an easy person to hate ... aggressive, cocky and opinionated. He is also creative, insightful, and productive,

a man who has made the most of his potentialities. Every one of us at this conference owes Al Lowen a large debt of gratitude. His books and the Bioenergetic movement he and John (Pierrakos) spawned have been the most significant force in body-oriented psychotherapy since Reich's own work. It has changed the face of body-oriented psychotherapy and personal growth practice.

He then added 'I use bioenergetic concepts and exercises in almost every session. So, I believe, do the great majority of ... hundreds of other professionals ... often without even knowing it'.

Alexander Lowen has died, but his work on the body and the body of his work live on. Some insight, some exercise, some tool which I can trace back to Lowen and the bioenergetic therapy he taught serves me well in almost every session I do. His diagnostic map of the body helps me to locate my client and myself when I am uncertain about what is happening psychotherapeutically. His simple injunctions 'breathe' and 'feet on the floor; ground yourself' bring me back to my centre. I am speaking, as Chuck Kelley did in 1996 and many others who paid tribute to Alexander Lowen when he died in 2008, of how Lowen's work and ideas are very much alive for me and for many other colleagues.

All of Alexander Lowen's books, many of which are out of print in Britain and elsewhere, have been reprinted in English by the Bioenergetics Press: visit www.bioenergeticspress.com or www.bioenergetics-society.com. Information about the journal *Bioenergetic Analysis*, published annually by Psychosozial-Verlag, is best found on the Institute website, bioenergetic-therapy.com; there is also a *European Journal of Bioenergetic Analysis and Psychotherapy* [see www.bioenergetics-journal.net]. Memorial statements after Lowen's death by various colleagues and clients, including the Erica Kelley's statement above, are available at www.lowenfoundation.org. Many of Lowen's best insights are quickly obtainable at <http://blog.gaiam.com/quotes/authors/alexander-lowen>.



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