

EGO DEVELOPMENT AND THE BODY

by

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There is so much I would like to tell you about psychotherapy and especially about this stuff that my wife and I developed 27 years ago called Pessó System Psychomotor. I would like to tell you some of the things I have learned in this work about helping people who have personal and emotional troubles.

What can we do in that short amount of time a client spends with us that will affect the way they live in some essential way? What tools do we have or can we create that can do such a thing? Is it even possible to do such a thing? I think so. I have seen many people change in ways that made their lives more possible and more satisfying and I hope to give you some picture or idea of the way I see the process of psychotherapy and the way I see people that helped make those changes happen.

Since the time a client spends in psychotherapy is so short compared to the time they spend on the rest of the activities in their lives, something must happen in psychotherapy that is heightened, special and intensely to the point. But at the same time it must not be hurried. A special arena must be created where this is possible. In fact, the name I have given that arena is the Possibility Sphere.

The Possibility Sphere is not a fantasy world ride although I can imagine such a thing in a fantasy world. You walk into this great big globe which is glowing with a lovely light, there is freshness in the air, there is a promise of pleasure, satisfaction and the expectation that something wonderful will happen, excitement, maybe even a bit of dread, because we all know that fantasy world rides are sometimes scary. The tourist in the fantasy world knows he is in a special place and his senses are heightened and he is aware of everything around him. You don't have to be a fantasy ride inventor to create the possibility sphere, but you can develop that atmosphere where the client, not a tourist, feels that something important can happen. What the therapeutic possibility sphere does is offer the client the possibility that there in the therapy setting, they can really be themselves. That's what begins to make it special. The possibility sphere invites out the parts of the client that are in trouble, that are hurting, that are tense and aching for resolution - and parts that are not yet found, like power. It offers it first by its emptiness, and then by its unspoken and implicit promise of awareness and reactivity.

In a way, a person with emotional difficulties is like a person in a tight fitting suit, or in a prison or in a torture chamber. Think of their bodies as their true self. Their bodies are being pinched by the too tight suit. The suit is their ego, and it really doesn't match the body underneath it as a good suit should. Or

they may have an even more dreadful ego which is a prison to their true nature. Or worse, their ego may have been constructed by such cruel interactions with their parents or parent substitutes that it constantly punishes and wounds the person so that they are in never-ending pain.

When such a client steps into the possibility sphere, they should feel something like this, "This person must be able to see how badly my suit fits." Or, "This person must see how much like a criminal I feel and how imprisoned I am." Or, "This person must see how much pain I am living with." Maybe they don't put those things directly in to words but I am sure they have a wordless hope that perhaps here they can get out of the discomfort they are in. But for sure their eyes and their body posture and their gestures speak for them. One of the messages given by the possibility sphere is that here the person can be as they really are, and that not only will they be seen, but they will be able find a suit here that really fits. That is, they will be responded to as they really are and therefore they will be able to find an ego that truly represents their soul.

When someone is being as they truly are, we call that being in the center of their truth. That means they are in touch with what they really feel, in PS terms that means in touch with the feelings and emotions in their bodies. But not only that, it also means that they are in touch with what they find themselves thinking about how things actually are in reality. By that I mean in touch with the messages that have been laid down in their egos by important life events, events that have told them what their value is, what they are like. Their identity has been mirrored back to them by their parents and caretakers, and by those events that tell them what the world is like, based on their experiences with how those parents behaved and acted in real life.

You, the therapist, at the other end of the possibility sphere, may be able to sense all of this, just because you see and feel that person in front of you. It is incredible how much information we get about a person just from being in their presence. It is your heightened awareness and consciousness that is your most important tool at this time, for it will tell you so much about the client from how your possibility sphere vibrates in reaction to the information pouring into it from the client. In this way you can think of the possibility sphere as a heightened field of awareness filled with the energy of your consciousness, intelligence, sensitivity and reactivity, but empty of your troubles, your needs, and your expectations.

Once the client is in the center of their truth, and in the therapy we encourage contacting their center by asking them to report what is in the foreground in the feelings in their body and what is in the foreground in their thoughts, memories and associations. Once the client is in the center of their truth, the next step is the creation of the true scene. The true scene is the beginning of building a situation that will result in producing change.

In Pesso System Psychomotor Therapy, the therapeutic instrument for producing change is called a structure. It's an appropriate word, structure, because it is a psychological construction that is made to do certain therapeutic work. Right now the work is to make the condition of the soul and the condition of the ego which surrounds it, visible. The true scene makes the center of truth visible, illustrated and illuminated by role-playing group members who play the parts in the interactions that highlight exactly the state of the client at that moment. The role players who do that are called accommodators. The word accommodator implies that role players will not improvise, but specifically adapt their behavior according to the needs and wishes of the person whose structure it is. In this situation the

accommodation means that the role-played responses, in action and in words, will exactly match - that is, accommodate - the actions and words, feelings and truths, in the client. This matching idea is captured in the notion of shape/countershape. If the client's actions and words are the shape, then the accommodator's perfectly tailored counter-actions and words are the countershape.

Let me give you an example of accommodation. Let's say the client feels sad and frightened. Can you see the shape of the client as he or she may be crying, huddled in fear, saying, "I'm terrified and don't know where to go?" What do you think the wished for countershape to that shape would be? The one that most accurately fits that shape in my mind would be an accommodating figure or figures who would embrace and encircle the huddled fearful person, their arms creating a haven which the frightened person could snuggle into. The implicit comforting, protective, accepting behavior would be accompanied by words. This makes the message of acceptance and care explicit and therefore more likely to be remembered consciously later. The typical words that are used at those moments are, "We care about you and can handle how frightened you are. We can protect you. It is OK to cry and come to us." Of course it is the client who is the one who finally determines what the wished for countershape will be, for the client is always in control of the accommodation and the structure.

What would inappropriate countershaping of parents look like? That's easy, just remember some of the situations your clients tell you about when they were children. Or think of a real child huddled in fear and crying. Brutal parents may beat such children for making too much noise. So instead of their bodies, their shapes, being respected and outlined by caring arms and hands, that is, carefully countershaped, those children may instead experience their bodies being attacked, their shapes not validated but punished and injured for being the way they are. Their tears not soothed but hated and ridiculed. Their feelings not accepted and treated gently, but ignored and asked to go away.

Before going on to describing the true scene, I want to carry the shape/countershape metaphor a step further. If we think of the soul as the shape, then the well fitting ego would be its proper countershape. Remember that the ego is constructed by the relationship, verbal and non-verbal, between a child and its parents. If that is how egos are constructed, and if well fitting or healthy egos are the appropriate countershapes of the soul, then we can see that poor egos, or ill fitting egos, are formed in relationship with those negative kinds of parents who provide inappropriate, self denying countershapes.

So talking about countershaping is another way of talking about constructing egos. If there is poor countershaping, there will certainly be poor egos. Or to combine this image with an earlier metaphor, if parents provide poor countershaping to their children's truth there will be tight fitting suits, or prisons for the soul or even suits that are too loose.

Now let us apply this shape/countershape metaphor to the concept of the possibility sphere. Remember the possibility sphere has an emptiness that is filled only with awareness and consciousness. Emptiness means it has no shapes in it, only the possibility of shapes. Having the possibility of shapes means that it can represent the basic stuff or the universal template, from which all countershapes can be formed. The emptiness of the possibility sphere carries the promise that all necessary countershapes needed to make a good fitting ego suit can somehow be constructed. This is another way of saying that the possibility sphere, the fundamental unspoken relationship between you the therapist and the client, is the foundation of hope and belief upon which all the future interactions with accommodating role-players will be built.

Now for the true scene. First let me say what the true scene is not. It is not a primal scene, it is not a traumatic scene. It is not even a scene of something that has happened in the past. It is a scene that illustrates the truth of the client at the very moment they are in now. Now, in the therapy, in the session. Sometimes people come into a session knowing exactly what they want to work on. Everything is prepared and worked out in their minds. They know what they want to feel, what they want to do and how they want people to react. If we followed this plan the structure or therapy work would be a kind of self manipulation process. They would put themselves through this and this situation in order to have a predetermined outcome. That is all very fine, but it has nothing to do with the truth of the moment. That kind of pre-planned self programming may lead to little therapeutic outcome. For the true scene, the therapist asks, "What are you feeling now, in your body, what is in the foreground in your mind?" We assume that this particular now will contain all the learned meanings of past situations, both good and bad. Also all the hopes and longings of those parts of the soul that have never been met and properly countershaped. Those parts of the soul are looking for ego and therefore acceptance into the outer world of reality and consciousness.

The client may answer, "I am feeling kind of uneasy and tense in my stomach. There is pressure on my chest and my throat feels closed." Your possibility sphere surrounding the client is receiving messages telling you how they feel. And through your possibility sphere you are in touch with how you feel about him. With this information you can consider the client's symptoms and combine that knowledge with how he looks and sounds to you on the emotional level. I'll tell you what happens to me when I hear those kinds of messages from that position. I think of feeling in the stomach as coming from unspecific emotions, the combination of feelings in the chest and throat indicate that the potential action might be something that includes the breath and therefore some sounds might be coming out of the throat. That could be forceful talking, crying, shouting or singing. But the closed throat indicates that there may be ambivalence, or at least inhibition about letting the feeling, emotion or energy come out of the throat. The pressure may come from the feelings in the stomach, be mobilized in the chest for the forceful expression of air and sound, but stifled and choked off in the throat.

And as I look at him, his posture, the look of expectation, hope or dread, I consider what emotion does it appear might come out of such a body. How does my body feel when I see a person in such a state in front of me? Do I feel like I would be afraid of such a person, or do I feel I would want to protect such a person? My body reactions and conscious speculations prepare me for what might actually come out at those times and gives me a range of possible interventions to suggest and offer the client.

But I might only say, "What do you think your body wants to do?" They might say, "I don't know, but my breathing feels kind of shaky." That would lead me to say, "Tighten or exaggerate the feelings in your chest and see what happens." This is a basic intervention which amplifies the tension temporarily and tends to push the potential expression to the threshold of action. If the intervention works, the emotional action, and the sound that accompanies it may come out.

I won't go through all the steps that such a procedure might require, but let us say that it results in the client making sounds and beginning to feel an emotion about which they had ambivalence, but which nonetheless was pressing for expression in the body. When there is inhibition, it could be because when such an emotion had surfaced sometime earlier in their lives, it had not been acceptable, or it had been ignored or they had been punished for having it. In other words, it may never have been properly countershaped. Let me bring in another term that has a similar connotation as countershaping - that is

the term, ego-wrapping. Ego-wrapping means to wrap the soul with ego. Do you know what I mean by wrapping? Wrapping is what you do when you put beautiful paper around a gift. Or what you do when you put a blanket around a baby. You wrap the baby in a blanket. So ego-wrapping means you wrap the shapes of the soul in those well fitting countershapes which lead to a well fitting, healthy ego.

There are steps that must be followed in having the soul fully ego-wrapped. One step is to give it a place. The soul must have the feeling that it is accepted inside something. If it is inside something then it has a place in that something. Just as a fetus inside the uterus is given the feeling that it has a place inside the uterus.

The second step is to give it a name, just as a child is given a name when it comes into the world. The name of the new part of the soul coming out, might be the name of an emotion, or an action, or it might be the name of a body part. What's the implication in giving names? Everything that has a name has a right to exist in consciousness. If it doesn't have a name it cannot live in consciousness.

The third step is to define its dimension, giving it boundaries. When children are taught about their body parts, they must be told what those parts do, what their function and limits are. Otherwise, the parts may appear endless doing unknown and unexplainable things.

The fourth step is to give a license. This gives it the right to exist. That is given by such words as, "It's all right to be angry. You have the right to be angry."

The fifth step is to give blessing. Blessing comes from words that say, "It's good what you do." All those things together add up to ego wrapping.

So here we are in the therapeutic session, and we therapists are inviting the client to come out with a new part of themselves, or an old part of themselves that has been in hiding in their body as symptoms. Who is there to welcome those parts into the world? Who will do the ego-wrapping? The therapist? His or her presence does give the client the courage to begin in the first place. What would happen if it was only the therapist who provided all the ego-wrapping? It might make the therapist too important and all powerful for the client. He or she would become so personally necessary for their future development.

We solve this through the use of symbolic figures role-played by group members. When the feelings are first showing up in the body, the client can ask for someone to role-play someone called the Witness Figure to be the verbal ego-wrapping, welcoming figure. That figure witnesses the truth of what is in the body, it is an ally of what is true for the person. What they witness is the emotional truth and they begin the process of ego wrapping it. If the client begins to feel tears. the witness figure can say something like, "I see how sad you are." This names the emotion and also gives a dimension to it by noting the amount of sadness in the word how. The witness figure is only the first part of the ego wrapping process. Other figures might come in which are called containing figures, or contact figures, comfort figures, or resistance figures. Those figures are used to make actual physical contact with the client, literally countershaping them with their bodies and movement as all those names imply. Further in the process they may evolve into full fledged ideal figures who are used to counteract the original negative figures of the past.

All well and good, we have these figures ready to receive and accept all that is coming out of the client, but the client and the client's history isn't that ready to have that happen. Remember the client was inhibited and ambivalent about the expression that was about to come out, and for good reason; there was a lot of pain involved in learning how not to let those feelings out. How is that part of the truth of the client made visible if this is supposed to be a true scene?

Here we bring in what we call fragment figures. We call them that because they are only fragments of attitudes and values, not actually people yet.

Let's say the client is now in the midst of feeling that forbidden emotion, let's say it was fear and vulnerability. The witness figure has noted it and the client has felt seen and accepted for a moment about having that feeling. Then the client has the words going through their mind, "This is ridiculous, you are an adult, what are you doing crying in the middle of the floor?" Those then become the lines for the fragment figure which will be named according to its function. The function of this particular figure is to ridicule the client, so it may be called the ridiculing figure. After such a figure is enrolled, it says back exactly the words in the client's mind, "This is ridiculous, you are an adult, what are you doing crying in the middle of the floor?" Or there might be a guilt giving figure, if the emotion was anger at one's parents, that figure might say, following the thought coming up in the client's mind, "You are bad, you should be guilty for having such a feeling about your mother." Do you see the psychological function of such figures? They represent the conscious negative record of events having to do with those feelings now rising in the body in that moment in the session. So here we have the witness figure and all the other allies and champions of the soul - the potential positive countershaping figures - and on the other side, we have the fragment figures who represent the negative countershaping attitudes of the past that were relevant to those emotions and feelings. Now we are in the true scene. We have made visible, illustrated and illuminated the true state of the client right now. We have externalized the internal drama, illustrating the conflict between the unwrapped soul parts and the old ego. The witness figure is the ally of the unrecognized soul parts. The ridiculing and guilt giving figures represent the internalization of the negative messages. The emotional process and thoughts going on inside the client are now perfectly represented in the room. This is the true scene. The client is in the center of the tension of the truth of their soul and the historical truth of their negative ego. But this time there are allies on their side, the therapist with the possibility sphere, the witness figure and the potential ideal figures are there too.

Let me just say that it is not a simple or easy task to bring things to this clear and sharp focus. It takes much training to see, hear and know how to work with non-verbal, verbal and role-playing process as well as how to get to the true center of things.

But this is only the beginning of a structure. The rest has yet to come, and here I am near the end of my time.

Now I have to do some condensing. Now the client is in the emotional and psychological state which will generate vivid memories of those past events that are the roots of the present conflict between their emotions and attitudes. As they talk about those events of the past, an interesting thing begins to happen. They start to feel some of the same emotions that they felt then and also their bodies begin to have some of the same reactions and feelings that they had then. Especially if the memories were when

they were beaten and abused or when they were longing for the satisfaction of their basic needs and those needs were denied and frustrated.

We began with the center of truth and the true scene which illustrates it and we suddenly arrive at an intense historical moment that is associated with it. We are in two intense moments, powerfully linked. The client is in their present consciousness, and because the true scene has been so vividly illustrated and illuminated, it induces them to remember themselves in those earlier, similar life conditioning moments of the past. It is as if the true scene was an unexpected doorway into history. Being in both those places at the same time, the client can do some important work with the help of the therapist and the accommodators.

The original event is now the past but its lessons have become embedded in the client in a way that it affects his present and future. A structure presents a "time machine" opportunity. The client can symbolically and emotionally go back in time and be in that state of consciousness where he remembers and feels his past state of being while remaining still in touch with his present consciousness and reality. He can, step by step, with the help of the therapist and the group, review and process the feelings left in his body at that earlier age. He can also reprocess the attitudes in his mind produced by those events, thus changing the ego lessons.

There is a present true scene and now a parallel historical scene can be being developed. Group members are asked to enroll as aspects of those people in the past who damaged them or denied their needs. The ridiculing and guilt giving figures can be expanded to the negative aspects of the parents in the historical scene - which we call the old map.

Once again the guide to the development of this structure is the feelings in the body and thoughts in the mind of the client. So when the client reports what he is feeling right now, it is the combination of the now of the present with the then of how he felt in his body as a child, because some of the same feelings are in his body at the present moment in the structure. If he reports trembling in his arms or shoulders and the therapist asks him to amplify the trembling he may come to realize that he wishes to attack his parents for having beaten him. When the client swings his arm at the negative parents, the accommodators react as if the blow landed on them, making the sound as if they had really been hit.

Further ego wrapping is done by the witness figure who notes how angry he is. The contact figures limit the blow, by holding the client's arms, defining the extent of the rage, saying "We can help you handle how angry you are. We will not let you literally kill them." That is the message they give by literally holding him back at that moment, at the same time giving room for the emotional expression.

As the structure goes on the client gets very aware of how bad things were and how much they missed having the kind of childhood that they saw other kids having, or read about in stories, or saw in the movies. Parents who would have been kind to them, treated them with respect, who would not abuse them, who would satisfy their basic needs.

When the client is in that needy state, the therapist can ask, "Would you like to choose group members to role-play parents who would have treated you the way you needed?." He can now experience and interact with those giving parents in his child consciousness. Much of the structure now deals with getting all those needs met in this symbolic setting. These ideal parents are the symbolic fulfillment of

the promise offered by the possibility sphere. The therapist neither role plays or attempts to literally become the ideal parent, but the character and personality of the therapist in combination with the caring of the group, supports the belief in the possibility of the principle of ideal parents. This human principle of caring and nurturing is very real and is directed in the structure to the child part of the client still living in the body and mind of the adult.

By providing the new input to the client while they are in the context of the old event which denied those needs and feelings, we will be affecting future present moments. Because as you remember, the present moment is dependent on old events. While the old map of the past is made visible and available for study and evaluation, we are in the position of helping the client create a new symbolic history and therefore have a new map intimately associated with the old one. More important for the client than the thought of a new map is the experience that the frightened child in him has been sheltered, that the abused child could scream with pain in caring arms, which gave dimension to his agony. That he found relief in loving faces and loving touch, which he soaked up through his skin nerves and muscles.

The structure is over, the role-players de-role. The client returns to the present, figuratively climbing out of the time machine. He leaves the place of heightened special intensity where there is the possibility to do and feel the things that may deeply affect his life.

Later, after the session, when the client is in the real world, he will experience new events that will partially arouse the old negative reactions and lessons. However, he now has this new symbolic memory which is clearly linked to the old one. With this he has more hope, and expectation that he will be treated well. He has more positive self images and anticipations about the world and people which gives him a broader range of alternative behavior. His body feels different, his soul has a better fitting ego and he feels more ready to meet what life has to offer. I hope you have heard something about ego development and the body that is interesting and useful to you.

Thank you.

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