

## Presenting Issue 23: The Role of the Client in Bodywork

### The Challenge of Guidance



**Client Guidance:** So many times over the years I have been asked in supervision and in classes: “I was taught in massage school to give clients what they want as long as it is not outside of professional boundaries. We have a walk-in clinic and these guys come in off the street who are all pumped up and want me to work harder and harder to relax them... they are much bigger than me and I’m getting exhausted. My body is tired and sore at the end of the day. What can I do?” Many bodyworkers, even the young and strong, develop symptoms in their own body and burn out after only a few years. Some who have been taught to use mechanical pressure to overcome body resistance develop carpal tunnel syndrome while they are still in school. We have supplemented our work with various pressure implements and mechanical devices like the “thumper” so that we can create tissue softening without so much fatigue. Or we request that the client spend time in a steam room or Jacuzzi to reduce their hypertonicity.

**Client Control:** The worse session of my career was my second session as a Trager student. The client was a female psychotherapist whom I knew. She had received bodywork before but never Trager. From the beginning of the session she told me what to do, where to push, when to change to a different part of the body. That was over 25 years ago and I remember the session as if it was yesterday. When I started to move different parts of her body she said: “Please stop moving me; I am getting over stimulated.” When I cradled her neck and took it into extension she said: “I am very sensitive in my neck; remove your hands I feel like you are going to strangle me.” When I started to rotate her upper leg using her quadriceps as a handle she said: “I want deep pressure right here,” pointing to her upper IT band. This was indeed a client from hell. I wrote the session up without stating my feelings about her, but I felt totally deflated and thank goodness I have never had a client experience like that again... just occasional reminders.



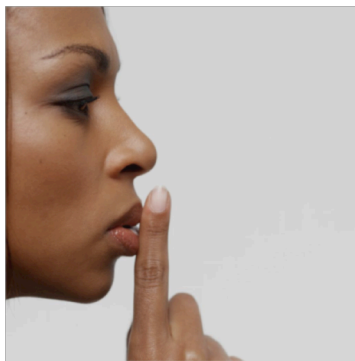
**Being Met:** Remember that the person who is trying to direct us lives in that body. She may not like her body. She may feel embarrassed about certain body parts or guilty about her symptoms. He may feel that it is important to stay pumped up during the day in order to feel “in charge” or attractive. Like Cinderella’s sisters she may be trying hard to attract her “prince” by wearing Italian pointy toed boots with 5 inch heels. What I find helpful in these situations is to guide clients into their bodies, right where they are feeling the symptoms, instead of helping them leave their body by going to sleep or zoning out. No matter what a person feels about his/her body, it is important to help that person feel into his/her body. This is the quickest and most effective way I know of to create a therapeutic and relaxing effect in the client.

So the client who is “directive” or the client who wants excessive pressure has the challenge of reaching into his/her body directly without the stories and judgments in the mind. So to the pumped up male I might say: “Meet me right here in this part of your body; feel right into my hands.” To the talkative or controlling client I can say: “Please describe what you are feeling right here where my hands are.” Something very curious happens at this point. The tissue starts to change and I become an accompanist rather than the repair man.

**Seitai Example:** A few years ago I was teaching a class in positional release for the upper body in Yokohama. There were two males in the class. One was in his mid twenties, the other in his mid thirties. Both were very strong and at the peak of physical condition. Both were seitai (pronounced saytai) practitioners and both were working full time in clinics doing deep and hard bodywork. The clinics have six to ten tables with no curtains and all the clients receive the same thing at the same time. The practitioners follow a protocol that is set by the clinic; the general guideline is compress into the body part until you feel a “resistance barrier,” and follow the client’s out breath with more pressure. Both of these men were experiencing painful symptoms in their own bodies that made them want to quit the work. The positional release techniques were much less demanding on their bodies, but both were concerned that they would lose their jobs if they were to apply them in the clinics.



So we did an experiment. They demonstrated on one another reversing roles. The whole class watched. The table was set low and each used his bodyweight to create the compressions. I could see why they were ready to quit. They had to use their shoulders arms and hands to support their upper body weight, over and over. After their demonstration I made one suggestion: “Instead of compressing right away, place your hands in position and ask the client to feel into your hands; and then follow the softening under your hands.” We were all astonished! When the client felt the practitioner’s hands there was an immediate relaxation effect. Instead of mechanical pressure, the mutual interaction between client feeling and practitioner compression resembled a well-rehearsed dance. They could keep their jobs and support their new learnings by adding the clients’ participation.



**Using Words:** Many practitioners are afraid to use words during a session. Why is this so? We have been afraid to use our words because we could be exceeding our “scope of practice.” Historically this situation dates from the early days of defining bodywork as a caregiving profession. We received strong warnings from psychologists, physical therapists, and the medical profession, not to use words because we have not had enough training to interact with clients in this way. We might trigger a client’s emotional past or help to turn them against a much needed medical procedure. So we complied and the preparation

for bodyworkers includes little or no use of words to heighten the clients’ body experience. Like some of my students we have worked this way, silently other than intake and summary write-up at the end of

the session. In fact bar tenders have more permission to use words and counsel with their patrons than bodyworkers! Have you ever heard of a bar tender being sued for counseling with patrons?

**Guiding Presence:** In these *Presencing* Issues I am suggesting that both clients and practitioners have a greater role to play in “body-centered” sessions and treatments. I am also sending you a separate description of a seminar that Genjo Marinello, Zen abbot and psychotherapist, and I will be giving on the evening of November 17<sup>th</sup>. We have been exploring the role of guidance during sessions ever since I started seeing him for supervision during my graduate school internship in 1993. Genjo is unique because he understands the limits of psychotherapy and how to guide Zen students’ into their own inner work towards spiritual self discovery. I went to graduate school to refine methods for guiding clients into their own internal presencing. We are facing a very profound future in the bodywork professions. Various methods of presencing will deepen our work with clients and bring new discoveries and boundless applications to our profession as well as shifting our concepts of therapy in general.

