



REVIEW: THE TRAGER APPROACH

Trager[®]: at the table—Part 3[☆]

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Abstract This paper is the third in a series on the Trager[®] approach from the perspective of an experienced practitioner. To the author's knowledge this is the first time the tablework performed in *Trager* has been described in-depth, in a forum outside the proprietary materials that each student of *Trager* receives.

Milton Trager's work at the table changed over the years, from more vigorous and less specific, to less vigorous and more specific. The work of *Trager* practitioners vary, depending upon when and how they were influenced by his work. Trager guided his protégés from the principles of physical culture, to a growing emphasis on the power of presence. He guided his clients from passively receiving new movements on the table, to actively creating those movements, as *Mentastics[®]*, off the table (*Mentastics* to be detailed in a future issue of *JBMT*). Trager developed varieties of ways to hold and move the body that were usually gentle and painless. Clients could sense their bodies moving but could not exactly feel how. Many of these ways of interacting with clients, and their bodies, are strikingly similar in principle to Eastern meditation and martial arts. To *Trager* tablework represents a dialogue between the mind of the practitioner and the mind of the client—a dialogue aimed at achieving wholeness as the practitioner takes the client on an inner journey. The *Trager* approach to the client has more in common to new somatic concepts of working with the body, than older approaches that try to fix what is wrong with the body. All the while the practitioner is "hooked-up," so that very subtle information can be worked with, while never pushing through the client's resistance.¹ Part of Trager's genius was that he was able to think and create outside the box of professional socialization. Many of the principles he taught and lived by are polar opposites of traditional methods in manual therapy and bodywork. Soft hands, no pain, less is more, change the mind-set, do not fix, and reinforcement, are just a few of his guidelines. In all these ways Trager's legacy challenges manual therapists to consider offering therapeutic relief from a different perspective.

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[☆]This article, as well as the other articles in this series, derives directly from the author's experience as a Trager practitioner, tutor and workshop leader. None of the text is drawn from proprietary sources. Unless otherwise noted, all materials, explanations, and descriptions are the author's alone.

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Movement—playing with gravity

Movement is one of the key signatures of the *Trager* approach. The client experiences rhythmical rocking motions much of the time during the tablework. Putting the client's body in motion has many advantages. Trager hypothesized that, when muscles that normally produce movement are receiving movement, something unusual happens in the neural feedback to the brain. The signals to the brain would be primarily receptive and would not include the usual impulses of muscle engagement and proprioception for that particular movement (Juhan, 1989). The passivity of the body allows the client to feel movements that might normally be blocked by muscle tension. In this way new movement possibilities may be perceived. There are also occasions when the client's body is still, while being compressed, stretched or simply supported. This stillness also includes intervals when the practitioner removes his/her hands and pauses. These pauses in movement and hand contact allow the client to sense and potentially assimilate the new movement possibilities.

Example—carrying and rocking a baby

A mother cradles her baby close to her body using soft, full-hand contact. She rocks the baby by moving her whole body. The baby relaxes, assured that this motion is safe and pleasurable. The closer to her body, the more trust the baby exhibits. When movement is generated with her arms and shoulders alone, the baby tenses up. If she extends her arms away from her body she will also feel the baby tense, showing less trust. The baby can feel the muscle strain in the mother's body, and also the shift away from the mother's center of gravity.² Parents also play games with the baby involving gravity: toss-and-catch and drop-and-catch. In these games the baby has a momentary experience of free fall—a slight sympathetic rush before he/she is caught. This short free fall induces a weightless state, allowing body parts to stretch and rebound before being caught in a reassuring fashion. And the baby chortles, laughs, and flaps his hands and legs, asking for more. These interactions with the parent introduce movement possibilities. Holding the baby close fosters trust and a playful sense of letting go.

The *Trager* practitioner at the table is working with the same kinds of responses in his/her client, while supporting body parts in various positional combinations of extension, flexion, rotation, tor-

²See *Trust Exercise 3* in JBMT hook-up article (Blackburn, 2004).

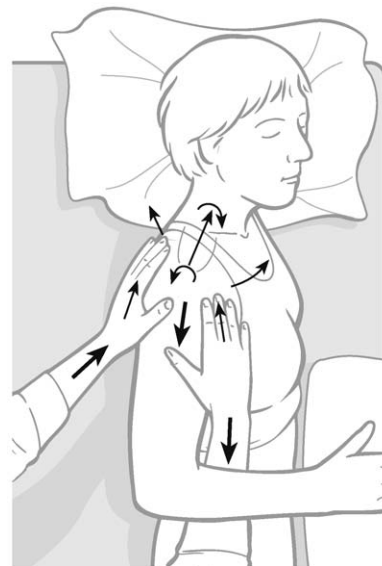


Figure 1 Holding shoulder—arrows indicate possibilities of movement and direction.

que, compression, and distraction. The movements happen within the safe confines of conditioned reflexes, creating a playful sense of letting go and trust within the client (Fig. 1). The sensitivity of the practitioner determines the drop-catch response, fine-tuning it to the client's reflexive response—like tossing and catching the baby.³

The rhythmical movement in Trager creates a lulling relaxation, like floating on the sea, or swaying in a hammock. The practitioner can vary different parameters: frequency, amplitude, direction, hand contact, pattern, pause, position, stretch, or compression, while initiating movement from his/her feet, as the hands catch, nudge and anchor the motion. Like a ballroom dancer, the practitioner can take advantage of gravity, momentum, tensegrity, and tonus, while feeling for signs of impedance and flow. The client may also feel various types of resistances in his/her own body of which he/she was previously unaware.

The practitioner's intention to induce releases determines the ways in which the movements are produced. When resistance is felt, even a slight reflexive arc that might precede muscle action, the practitioner can adjust the movement so that it falls within the range of least resistance.⁴ As the session proceeds the practitioner adjusts the parameters of movement in response to changes in resistance, relaxation and mobilization.

³The same movements are created in Mentastics.

⁴In *Trager* hypermobility and hypertonicity are often treated alike. The lack of appropriate response in hypermobility becomes a signal to the practitioner to do less movement. In small amplitude movement the hands of the practitioner act as the major muscles, and offer appropriate feelings of tonicity and support.

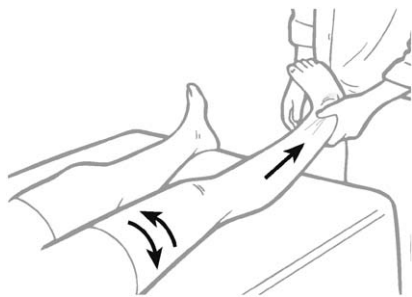


Figure 2 Leg in traction and rotation.

Example—the body in motion

Imagine the body as a fluid-filled sack with various densities of material, and a fascial network in that sack, all connected together. All of bodily fluids, of varying viscosity, are in some kind of directional movement within compartmental or vessel spaces. The fascial web moves according to the movements of various types of tissue. When a leg is tractioned and rotated, the long bones operate like impellers in a washing machine—moving the tissues connected to, and surrounding, them from the inside out—affecting bodily tissue at the deepest level, without force (Fig. 2).

Rhythm

The body has various rhythms associated with its different systems, such as: heart rate, respiration, craniosacral, and digestion. Those systemic rhythms are affected in degree by whether the body is at rest or in motion. The client may benefit from movement that assists circulation of various bodily fluids. To the author's knowledge the effects of *Trager* movement on the circulation of body fluids has not been measured experimentally in a clinical setting.

But like everything in creation there are resonant frequencies inherent in bodies that are revealed when any part is put into motion. These rhythms are probably determined by a number of factors: the types of tissue one is dealing with, the tensegrity and tonus of connective tissue, the patterns of tension or guarding in the client, and the wave-like action of fluids in motion. The practitioner can find rhythms where it takes almost no energy to keep a body part in motion.⁵ Not only that, but at those frequencies the movement seems to resonate throughout the rest of the body.

In a cello, the material, length, and tension of the bowed strings, and the shape and integrity of the instrument, precondition its resonant frequen-

⁵Like the slight energy it takes to keep a clock pendulum in motion or like learning just the right timing and arm and leg pumping to maintain or increase height on a swing.

cies. Body resonance is conditioned by the integrity of connective tissue, muscle tonus, and the resting state of the individual. Tension in the body is preset just as it is in a stringed instrument, and the *Trager* practitioner, like the musician, attempts to work with that preset tension by adding or subtracting stretch or compression at various locations, while rhythmically moving the body parts.

There seem to be two factors that affect the practitioner's ability to produce resonant frequencies in the client: the kind of preconditioning that exists in the practitioner's mind, and whether or not the practitioner entrains his/her whole body movement to those resonant frequencies. Trager used to say "Bring it from your feet." The practitioner who has difficulty with either of these factors has a hard time feeling the sudden reduction of effort and whole body oscillation that evidence this resonance. This is one reason that Trager encouraged practitioners to step back from the table and use *Mentastics*[®] to release their own tensions.

The tablework principles

Presence/witnessing

In the second article in this series "continuous presence" was described as the state of awareness that a *Trager* practitioner tries to achieve. Presence, or what Trager called "hook-up," is not just concentration on what is occurring in the client's tissues from moment to moment, it is a sharing of feeling experience with the client (Juhan, 1993).⁶ This state of awareness is essential for successful application of tablework in *Trager*. Maintaining presence is so important that, regardless of how skilled a practitioner is in the mechanics, technique and even understanding of the work, without hook-up it can only be a superficial representation of what *Trager* has to offer.⁷

⁶Compare with Gendlin for his explanation of "felt experience" (Gendlin, 1996).

⁷There are various ways of remaining in hook-up during the tablework. One way is to remain aware of how gravity is affecting the interaction as weight, as proprioception, as tissue response or as subtle sensation. Another is to verbally narrate what is happening either as client or practitioner. Another is just to remember the unique feeling of presence. Another is to remain continually curious. The elusiveness of presence is primarily due to the fact that as long as our minds are occupied with thoughts about outcomes, judgments, comparisons or protocol, we are not in presence. Also, presence is not entrancement—so if we feel ourselves drifting off, losing our connection, or becoming absorbed or enmeshed, we're not hooked-up (Blackburn, 2004).

Presence forms a link that seems to allow the transfer of many types of information between practitioner and client. When that link is open the practitioner feels a knowing sense of where to go next, and how to vary any of the touch parameters of pressure, direction and absorption. Trager said that this mutual feeling is contagious, "You catch it from someone who has got it" (Trager and Guadagno, 1987). The author puts it a little differently: presence creates an invitation to the "wholeness" that is already implicit within both persons. And part of that wholeness, like Martin Buber's concept of "I-Thou," includes an awareness of mutuality (Buber, 1986).

With presence there is close listening. The body is being asked how it is rather than being told how it should be. This listening can evoke the same response in the client. There is a non-judgmental quality to tablework that is guided by close listening. The work becomes more relational. Instead of pursuing the symptoms, the practitioner is pursuing the mind of the client. And presence makes such a pursuit possible. There is a communion, a conjoining of purpose as well as touch. And that purpose, more and more, becomes the pursuit of wholeness.

Gentleness

Nothing in the world
Is as soft and yielding as water.
Yet for dissolving the hard and inflexible,
Nothing can surpass it.

The soft overcomes the hard;
The gentle overcomes the rigid.
Everyone knows this is true,
But few can put it into practice. Tao Te Ching, Lao-tzu
(Mitchell, 1991).

The second principle is gentleness. Gentleness, like presence, is a primary way of connecting with the client during the tablework. Gentleness does not mean a lack of strength or intention in the practitioner. Gentleness in Trager is like the "principle of gentleness", called *ju-no-ri*, in judo. It is a way of working with resistance both in oneself and the client. Underlying this principle is the wisdom of not opposing resistance, but meeting it with pliancy, patience and understanding. One must be peaceful and present at the core. Gentleness rests upon qualities of patience, attention or listening, acceptance and curiosity. These qualities come out in the interaction during the tablework, by the kind of contact and body movements that are created.

Qualities of gentleness

Patience is expressed in pauses; the practitioner's hands are removed, creating an opportunity for the client to integrate or absorb what has just happened. During pauses the practitioner may also be coming back into presence.

Attention or listening is expressed through soft "weighing" hands that are supportive as well as directive. This kind of attention is similar to "bare attention" in Buddhist meditation. The practitioner brings enough attention to listen and nuance, but not enough to absorb or overpower.

Acceptance is exemplified by an intention to work within the client's own range of guarding rather than forcefully moving outside of that zone. In other words the best way to move beyond conditioning is through the doorway of conditioning. The object is not to defeat the symptoms of resistance, but to work with them within their own territory. Acceptance gives clients a freer sense of themselves and fosters self-acceptance.

Curiosity, when guided by gentleness, brings both persons into a state of *open exploration*. This state of open exploration is one of the attributes of presence. Curiosity was probably the most consistent quality of Trager's own approach to tablework.

Excerpt on gentleness from a Trager introductory class

Those hands that you had during the hook-up exercise were gentle hands. When I walked around and felt your hands, it felt like your hands were puffy, as if you were wearing soft mittens...these soft, listening hands. In Trager you learn to relax your hands and then bring the movement. What you are doing now is giving the person on the table some of your weight. You are still working with gravity, but now the person on the table has become a moving surface as she is feeling some of the weight of your upper body through your hands. Notice that your hands are still soft while you are doing this, making sure that you are just giving your weight, rather than "muscling in" to his/her resistance. The results feel very different to the person on the table. If you can bring in those hands that could feel the weight of the feather, then you can gather much more information from your client. If you meet resistance, lighten up. When you do less, it's an invitation for the client's mind to do more. There is no gain with pain in Trager. That doesn't mean that Trager practitioners don't do things that sometimes cause pain for their clients, but when we do, we are slipping out of Trager. Milton Trager believed that small increments of pleasure are much more effective than large increments of pain, when it comes to

releasing patterns and producing actual change (Trager Introductory Workshop in Seattle, 2002).

No pain—a paradox

Trager would say: “When you’re creating pain you are not doing *Trager*”. He was not talking about preexisting discomfort; he was referring to anything the practitioner would attempt that created more pain in the client. All of the movement and positioning and hand contact in *Trager* tablework is designed to stay within a zone that does not trigger defensive reactions in the client. Even “good pain,” the kind of pain that is welcomed by the client as a sign that relief is coming, seems to interfere with the mind’s ability to trust and let go. There is a paradox here because many of the things a *Trager* practitioner does in a session might not take the client out of pain. Whereas the pain of deep compressions, trigger point releases, shiatsu or spinal adjustments may take someone out of pain immediately.

The paradox is that the goal of bringing the client into a new relationship with his/her body, may involve bringing the client into a new relationship with his/her pain. Getting rid of the pain, though it might bring immediate client satisfaction, is not the uppermost goal in *Trager*—nor is it to teach clients to become inured to their pain. The practitioner is not insensitive to the client’s pain, and yet he/she focuses the session differently. It might seem that a client who is out of pain feels freer, lighter and more capable of responding to bodily demands, compared with one who is in pain. Underlying this pain paradox is a surprising realization. By choosing to avoid pain or get rid of it, we are conditioning our behavior in ways that may limit our responses.

A far more useful approach by the caregiver is to help a client get beyond his/her fear. Often it is the fear of pain or its consequences that limits our responses, not the pain itself. The gentle rocking motions of *Trager*, take the client out of fear. Many times a pain-free state is induced in *Trager* as the direct result of taking the client out of fear, not out of pain. Clients who have suffered with intense chronic pain are surprised to learn that they can experience pleasurable movement without increasing pain. And as their fear of movement drops away so do the restrictions.

Our bodies are always giving us painful sensations of one sort or another. These sensations are highly useful, but not if we are always moving away from the pain. Many things in life such as building endurance or muscle mass, learning to ride a bicycle, or cross-country skiing can require that

we absorb our pain or even embrace it for the sake of expanding our abilities. Most people who are in pain do not realize that there are many other kinds of sensations occurring along with their pain, some of which feel quite pleasurable.⁸

In the helping professions, pain is usually seen as “the problem”. We can all agree that, without the distraction of the pain, the client would become more fully aware of, and freer in, his/her body. But this popular position overlooks the fact that pain is probably our most trustworthy teacher in relating to our bodies. The *Trager* practitioner pays attention to subtle reflexes when adjusting movement. The client is learning to trust those same reflexes in order to find easier and freer ways to move.

One last point about this pain paradox is that focusing our work on pain relief is like making a Faustian bargain. Clients who rely on practitioners to relieve their symptoms may never realize that *they* have the greatest influence on their own affliction. When *Trager* clients feel demonstrable proof that this is so, they become more responsible and less dependent upon the practitioner. This bodes well for the long-term therapeutic relationship. There will likely come a time when, no matter what the practitioner does; the client’s symptoms will not change. Then the question is: “Has the client learned to be adaptable, or has he/she learned only two responses to pain: avoidance or resignation?”

Doing less is more

Another unique feature of Trager’s approach to his work with clients was his emphasis upon “effortlessness.” This concept applies to the tablework as well as the *Mentastics*. Like the principle of “no pain,” this concept can be misinterpreted to mean that there is a superficial and vapid quality to the work. Nothing could be further from the truth. The practitioner is continually asking him/herself: “How much effort is this requiring?” Trager believed that the more you “efforted,” the more out-of-touch you were; the more out-of-touch, the less effective.

The following conditions are *signs of efforting* in the practitioner: tightening hands, loss of sensitivity, causing pain or fear in the client, impatience, losing the client’s rhythm, and overriding his/her own aches and pains. There are various *reasons* that effort shows up: poor body mechanics, losing

⁸Two different approaches to experiencing our pain as essential for healthy functioning and for the growth of awareness come from hand surgeon Paul Brand and meditation teacher Jack Kornfield. (Brand and Yancy, 1993; Kornfield, 2000).

presence or hook-up, getting caught up in “fixing,” countertransference, over-scheduling. Trager’s answer to all of these possibilities was that the practitioner needed to stop “trying;” pause, step back and take care of the problem by hooking-up, and/or doing *Mentastics*. The benefits of pausing are manifold: the practitioner “restores” him/herself, and comes back in with less preconditioning; the client has an opportunity to feel into his/her body without connecting this experience to the practitioner’s hands; these “pauses” often create an experience of integration for the client and inspiration for the practitioner.

There is an underlying axiom that accompanies sessions where the practitioner strives for effortlessness: “less is more.” The way this works is that the practitioner treats resistance deferentially. The more resistance one feels; the less effort one expends. Trager often said: “When you meet resistance, lighten up.” So resistance and effort become *inversely proportional*. The more tightness or client control—the less the amplitude of the movement, the less weight the practitioner uses, the more often and longer the pauses. Thus, the situations that would seem to call for the expenditure of more energy actually call for less.

In *Trager* tablework as in craniosacral, the paradox is that, when “doing less” in response to higher resistance, the units of incremental release are less, but may be more assured of occurring. In the martial arts the opponent’s strength can be used to defeat him/her. The parallel with bodywork is that with resistance the client’s energy is already bottled up. When the practitioner does less, the *client* can release that energy. When the practitioner does less, there is more opportunity for the client to occupy that space with his/her awareness, which is the ultimate goal. Doing less is like speaking softly to someone who is fearful; it gets his/her attention far more effectively than shouting. After demonstrating remarkable changes in client response, Trager was fond of saying: “I didn’t do nothing”.

Way of soft hands

Underlying all the work between practitioner and client is soft, full-handed contact. Trager was noted for this kind of contact: “His hands feel as if they are covered with chalk.” The irony here is that chalk on the hands of an athlete makes for more complete connection with the surfaces they encounter. Soft hands are better able to adapt to different kinds of tissue and surface contours. As with “empty hands” in *tai chi*, soft hand contact is



Figure 3 Close up Photo of Trager’s “soft hands” (Trager International Archives).

not conditioned by preset postural or movement patterns. They can then be fully responsive to what they encounter. Sometimes called “listening hands,” in *Trager*, they are able to receive and send very subtle information from and to the client (Fig. 3).

In order to make this kind of contact with the client, the practitioner has to be present and “empty” him/herself. This means letting go of judgments and letting go of his/her own tensions. If the practitioner cannot relax his/her forearm extensors and flexors, it is a good time to step back and do some *Mentastics*. Trager would say: “You cannot give what you have not got.” This means that the practitioner must monitor his/her own physical and mental state and make adjustments (Blackburn, 2003).

The real value of soft, full-handed contact is that it gives the client the experience of being safely supported and moved without a sense of how that movement is occurring. There is a gradual building of trust and release in the client because the sensitivity and presence acquired with soft hands allows the practitioner to work without producing pain. As unconscious resistance is released, the empty hands of the *Trager* practitioner confirm those changes through the modifications of the movements.

Soft hands in action—taking the slack out

Example of a freight train

In *Trager* classes a freight train pulling out of a station is sometimes used to explain the slackless connection. In order to overcome the inertia of each car and ensure that there is not undue strain on the couplings, the engine starts pulling slowly, engaging each car so that all cars are engaged, before the whole train

comes up to speed. The same thing applies in reverse when the train brakes.

The phrase that is used for the ways of *engaging* the client's body parts with soft, pliant hands is called *taking the slack out*. Each of the ways described below requires a combination of hand-hold and body weight and is used in conjunction with rhythmical movement. The tissue is held with just enough grasp or pressure to support the weight and engage the tissue. A simple guideline for hand contact is: What is the way that feels most *effortless* to the practitioner, without conveying a sense of tentativeness, or lack of connection, to the client? The practitioner finds ways to engage the tissue so that there is stretch or compression along fascial planes or "meridians" (Myers, 2001). Soft, listening hands allow the whole body of the practitioner to become the center for interpreting the client's responses.

Traction—leaning out: By leaning out the practitioner is able to use his/her body weight to counterbalance the weight of the client's body part, and bring stretch and movement within a pain free zone of elastic response. He/she can also combine extension, flexion, compression, side-bending, translation, and rotation (Fig. 4).

Duck bill grip: With flat thumb and flat fingers drawn together like a duck's bill or baseball mitt, the practitioner gathers soft tissue into palms. This grip is ideal for gently drawing tissue away from the



Figure 4 Neck traction.



Figure 5 Holding quadriceps with flat fingers.



Figure 6 Chest compressions.

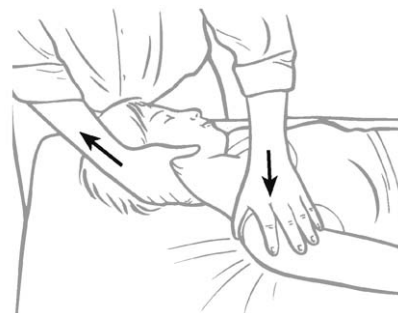


Figure 7 Creating length between neck and shoulder.

skeleton, without creating pain. This grip is used for holding muscle bellies, IT band and adipose tissue (Fig. 5).

Linear compression—leaning in: These compressions are determined by the amount of body weight and direction the practitioner brings to the tissue. The contact is given through soft palmar surfaces and pads of fingers and thumbs, avoiding bone-on-bone contact by the heel of the hand. These compressions can be static or combined with movement. These compressions are useful for long muscles, intercostals, shoulder girdle, hip rotators and flexors, and QLs (Fig. 6).

Expansive—spreading compression: The same as *linear* compression except that the practitioner's hands are spreading away from each other in order to expand or add breadth to the tissue underneath them. These compressions are particularly useful for intercostal spaces, intervertebral spaces and spreading between neck and shoulder, lower ribs and pelvis (Fig. 7).

Oppositional—gathering compression: Soft full hands are opposite and compressing toward one another, holding tissue between them with just enough pressure to bring that body part into motion. These compressions are especially useful for soft belly tissue, large thighs, or bony tissue, such as ribs and trochanter (Fig. 8).

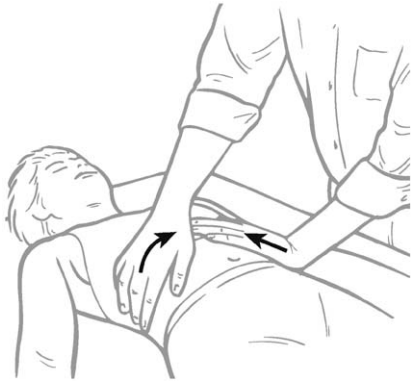


Figure 8 Gathering belly tissue.



Figure 9 Torquing across ribs and shoulder.

Torquing—wringing compression: Hands compress towards, or opposite, one another, but are staggered so that the tissue or body parts in between the hands are wrung, or stretched, in opposite directions. Example: Reaching across the client's body, one hand, positioned on ribs, is drawn towards the practitioner while other hand, positioned on ipsilateral pectoralis minor, stretches the shoulder in the opposite direction (Fig. 9).

Giving weight of hands and forearms: Surprisingly, when working in places like the abdomen or the back, where one is moving the whole torso, just giving the weight of the hands and forearms provides enough connection for minimal tissue engagement. This minimal connection allows the practitioner to feel very subtle pulses and movements within the client's body, while working with tensegrity and harmonic resonance. When the rhythmic frequency is just right, there will be a harmonic motion generated throughout the whole body, and the client's head will just start to drift free of, or lag slightly behind, the movement of the torso.

Sinking in: Another form of taking out slack is to sink in deeper with the mind when working with a body part. The body is composed of different layerings of tissue density and tensegrity. With soft full hands it is possible to feel tissue response at

very deep layers of the physical and emotional holding. In classes Trager would say: "Sink in with your mind" (Liskin, 1996). This is particularly helpful when the practitioner is trying to affect deep restrictions that would otherwise require painful intervention to even contact. The movement, when thus directed, allows the body to be worked *from the inside out*, so to speak.

Exercise—softening your hands (20 min)

Start with "weighing hands" from the hook-up article (Blackburn, 2004). Notice the physiological and subjective changes that happen to your hands and mind—notice the ability to shift your awareness from I-it objectivity to I-thou connectivity. As you weigh your hands look at your hands. You will notice that your hands look more flushed; you may also notice that your hands look larger and softer. Now switch your focus to the feeling you have in your hands. Perhaps they feel warm and tingly; perhaps they feel cool and moist. As you feel the sensations in your hands, notice that your looking has become a gaze rather than a sharp focus. This gaze is sometimes called "soft eyes" in Trager. Notice also that you are able to look as well as feel and that this combination gives you a feeling of convergence with your hands. Now start to interact with a physical object by noticing the kind of contact your hands make with that object. Notice how much you are able to measure with your senses in this highly curious state. And notice what you feel from this non-animate object. Notice what happens when you switch from minimal contact and interaction to more interaction. Notice that with your state of presence with this object, it takes on a different quality. The I-thou shift produces a sense of this object's place in the world, and in your life. You may start to ask more fundamental questions like: Why this object? Why this time? Was there a human involved in creating this object? Why does it rest in my hands just so? Does it have a built in function? Did I choose this object for some aesthetic reason? Does its shape, color, pattern, or weight have particular appeal to me?

Addressing the intrinsic wholeness within

It could be argued that in body-centered work practitioners are interacting with two contrasting facets of their client's body-mind. The first is the preset reactive conditioning. The second is an *intrinsic potential for therapeutic change*. The intrinsic potential for therapeutic change could be called an "inner healer." The preset conditioning could be called the "inner defender." Trager maintained that patterns of resistance accumulate in the client's unconscious mind. He concluded that

positive change only happens when the client's mind has been changed through new experience.⁹ The author argues that an intrinsic potential for therapeutic change has shifted into conscious awareness. Trager would agree although he described this potential as the sharing of universal life force.

Clients often offer an explanation of their symptoms and how they contracted them. And most want their unwanted symptoms removed. The story they carry about their discomfort can be part of their resistance to change. These clients may have difficulty in coming to an understanding that they are holding on to those symptoms. Trager believed that *hook-up* creates a direct link between the inner healer, or intrinsic wholeness of practitioner and client, so that if the practitioner can really listen to this shared inner healer, every session offers the potential for a recovery of intrinsic wholeness.

Example: working with Ellie's arm

In a session the author starts to explore the right (see Fig. 10) arm of the client. "First I just hold the lower arm, feeling the weight and noticing the responses in the tissue as I weigh the arm in different positions. A change in weight signifies to me some kind of change in the connective tissue. I notice that as I pronate the forearm it feels lighter as I weigh it, and then drop-and-catch. Next I move my left hand so that it is supporting the arm under the elbow, and repeat the movements as described above, feeling the connective tissue responses in and around the elbow. I feel tautness in the thumb extensor and in the lower triceps. I palpate those attachments as I rotate the lower arm and elbow into different positions. I find a spot where there seems to be equal tautness in all directions; I gently hold that position and ask the client how that feels. She responds with a sigh. "I feel a big sense of relief." I immediately feel a release of the tautness in the connective tissue and proceed to more dropping and catching. All of a sudden there is a delightful freedom in the forearm, wrist and hand, and the client can feel the change. I then proceed to

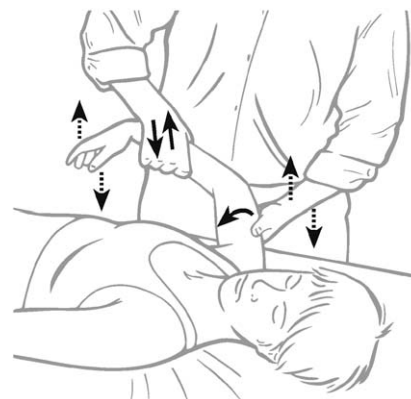


Figure 10 Sample of arm and shoulder work.

do a similar kind of questioning of the upper arm, focusing on the freedom of movement, with and without support, under the shoulder joint. After freeing up the upper arm and shoulder joint, I proceed to the shoulder girdle, and its relation to the rib cage and sternoclavicular joint, combining movement, compression, distraction and holding. When all segments have been explored in this way, I then create some complex movements that affirm, for the client and myself, the quality of movement available. Then finding that there is still some tautness in the thumb extensor, I check the thumb for movement and find some crepitus at its base. I support the forearm by holding the soft tissue of the flexors with my left hand, and then with my right hand holding the palm and back of her hand between my thumb and pads of fingers, I give her hand a rapid fluttering movement with my right hand, while palpating the extensors and flexors with my left... . The thumb flutters freely...I continue until I feel a release in the thumb extensor. I then hold the thumb and wrist with both of my hands and then check the movement of the thumb. Once again there seems to be one position where there is a slight tautness in both directions. I hold the thumb and wrist in that position and ask the client to notice what she feels. She sighs again and says, "It feels so good...It's hard to describe" I feel a slight reflexive tremor and then a release of all the tautness. I check the thumb for crepitus and find none. I ask the client to take some time to feel down into her arm and store away the feeling she has. After the tablework I teach her some Mentastics[®] movements so that she can replicate the feeling on her own" (Author session narrative, 2003).

Reinforcement and recall

One of the most important aspects of *Trager* tablework is the attention paid to any changes that occur. At the beginning of a session, before the client gets on the table, the practitioner will ask the client to perform a series of ordinary, simple

⁹There are strong parallels here with the somatic approaches of Milton Trager, Eugene Gendlin and Thomas Hanna. All three addressed their work toward an intrinsic wholeness that they believed lay at the core of their endeavors. All demonstrated benefits for those clients who could feel *into* their defensive conditioning. They believed that the shift in awareness that ensued facilitated a growth of consciousness. Hanna believed that correction of limitation occurs when one feels the possibilities of movement...[i.e., the potential for change is inherent]. Gendlin believes that the implicit core is the agent of correction. Trager believed that one could be connected to universal life force by being contacted by someone who was already connected [hooked-up] (Gendlin, 1996; Hannah, 1993, 1995; Trager, 1987).

movements, such as walking. Through such movements the practitioner can observe patterns of compensation and restriction. Even more significant for the session, is to have the client become aware of, and report how these movements feel from the inside.

This observation and subjective reporting establishes a baseline for later comparison. During the tablework, when the practitioner feels a lessening of restriction, she/he calls the client's attention into that body part. Because of Trager's emphasis on shifting the patterns of restriction by changing the mind-set of the client, this is perhaps the most important part of the session. When the client consciously feels the changes that are occurring, the changes are reinforced.¹⁰ Trager would anchor this experience for the client by saying something like "Notice what you are feeling right now. You can bring this feeling back to this part of your body anytime you wish by just asking yourself: 'What was I feeling when Milton was working with me?' When you recall the feeling, the restrictions will disappear" (Liskin, 1996).

As the tablework continues, there are various opportunities to underscore the changes that are occurring. The client is encouraged to *feel* the changes rather than think about them. Trager would often have the client get off of the table and try some *Mentastics*, as needed, to reinforce new movement possibilities and anchor the new feelings that accompany them. Also, during the tablework portion, the practitioner will step back and do some *Mentastics* for him/herself and come back into the session refreshed. So the *reinforcement and recall* approach is just as important for the practitioner as for the client.¹¹

At the end of the tablework portion the practitioner can spend time teaching *Mentastics* to the client, again reinforcing the changes that have occurred. As at the beginning of the session, the

client is asked to describe how these movements feel and notice his/her newfound freedom of movement. And the client is encouraged to practice these movements on his/her own in order to duplicate much of the feeling of the session.

Improvisation

Trager used to say that you have to "fool the mind" of the client. It is as if the client's unconscious mind gets used to certain movements and is able to adapt his/her resistance to those movements. But when the practitioner varies the movements, even very subtly, this defensive adaptation-pattern protection does not work. The practitioner that can continually improvise is thus able to challenge or coax the client's conditioned mind in an ever-changing variety of ways.

In this sense *Trager* tablework can be compared musically to jazz. The practitioner, like the jazz musician, must become a virtuoso in her/his ability to work with the body and connect with the mind of the client. And then, when he/she has a real feel for the work and is facile enough to put together a spontaneous mixture of movements for any part of the body, the true beauty of the work can shine forth.

Summing up—with curiosity

Curiosity would seem to subtend all of the characteristics that guide the tablework in *Trager*. When we are curious we are not imposing our preconceived ideas on a situation. When we are curious we ask questions that have an open-ended aspect to them. We want to find out how something is—we are asking basic ontological questions such as "What is it like to be living life in this body?" Curiosity is interactive and relational. "What happens when I do this?" Guided by gentleness, curiosity wants to know more about this person, this body, this life.

Trager would ask open-ended questions such as: "How could this be...? What needs to happen...? What could be lighter, freer, more open...?" He was always searching for a way to reach and share his curiosity about wholeness with the client. Guided by a sense of mystery, curiosity is about investigating the unknown: What wants to be revealed here? What wants to surface both for practitioner and client? What is intrinsic, what is in the design? What are the inner workings? Like pure science one can ask these questions openly and honestly. Like pure philosophy, one can ask these questions with an assurance that the process of investigation itself

¹⁰The similarities to Feldenkrais here are compelling. In each system the client is given opportunities to change patterns by becoming aware of these new possibilities. However, the difference is one of emphasis. In Feldenkrais the intellect gets involved in figuring out ways to alter restrictive movement patterns. In *Trager* the emphasis is on "listening inside", as the body reports new sensations of less restricted movement. The mind is changed through *listening* to the body rather than *directing* the body (Blackburn, 2003).

¹¹The author is struck by the many elements of boxing that Trager brought into his work: *Mentastics*, which will be covered in the next article in this series, are similar in intent to the light-step dancing movements boxers practice in order to have positional advantage with their opponent, and to be fluid and "dazzling" in their combinations of responses. "It's all in the footwork," and "bringing it from your feet," are coaching idioms in boxing, parallel to Trager's "come from the feet" and "fooling the mind of the client" (Liskin, 1996).

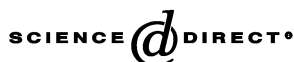
reflects the beauty of the design. We are probing the mystery of being with our hands, and trying to interact through a medium, the body–mind system, that we are part of, trying to understand the designer by questioning the design.¹²

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¹²Physicist David Bohm argued that everything in the universe is *enfolded* within what he calls "implicate order," which could also be called implicit wholeness, which at the same time is *infolded* within everything in the universe. We apprehend this implicit design directly through feeling and movement and indirectly through thought. "In the implicate order we have to say that mind enfolds matter in general and therefore the body in particular. Similarly, the body enfolds not only the mind but also in some sense the entire material universe...we do not say that mind and body causally affect each other, but rather that the movements of both are the outcome of related projections of a higher dimensional ground [implicit wholeness—author insert] (Bohm, 1981).