

April 22, 2002

LEVEL: xx

[Appendix II]

## ***Pressure Is Love***

[URL: PressureIsLove]

SECTIONS (& perhaps subsections): [none]

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Therefore the sage is sharp but not cutting.  
Pointed but not piercing.  
Straightforward but not unrestrained.  
Brilliant but not blinding.  
— Lao Tsu (??/1972:§58, ll.12-15)

I believe that no one can 'save' his fellowman by making the choice for him. All that one man can do for another is to show him the alternatives truthfully and lovingly, yet without sentimentality or illusion. Confrontation with the true alternatives may awaken all the hidden energies in a person and enable him to choose life as against death. If he cannot choose life, no one else can breathe life into him.  
— Erich Fromm, quoted in *Maryknoll Magazine*

I formulated the central idea in this essay around 1980, while in therapy with Dr. Brad Blanton, whose approach involved Gestalt therapy with an admixture of body work (massage et al.). Both therapies involve what Brad termed “experiencing your experience”.<sup>1</sup> In massage therapy, at least the form I’m talking about here, pressing on muscles in certain ways bring their pain to the surface, whereupon they start to heal. This pain arises not from physical damage (torn muscles, nerve injury, etc.), which requires much different treatment, but rather the pain of chronic tension. Pressing on the chronically tense muscles calls that tension into question, so to speak, and the pain directs one’s attention to that tension, allowing one to choose whether it really makes sense to

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<sup>1</sup>Brad Blanton (personal communication): “When you experience your experience, your experience disappears.” I don’t know whether this specific formulation was original with him, but he certainly lives it.

keep it. If one is able to relax around the pain – an odd but nevertheless precise description of how one “experiences one’s experience” in that situation –, one is choosing to give up the chronic tension, restoring one’s body’s ability to respond flexibly instead of rigidly to the world.

A strikingly similar process occurs in Gestalt therapy, at least as I view it, and in many other therapies, regardless of their theoretical and practical details. In Gestalt therapy, the counselor helps one focus one’s attention on some painful conflict. In the face of that pain, one’s attention tends to slip away – the reason it is so hard to counsel oneself. But when one is able to call that pain to consciousness and dwell within it, the personas in conflict (for so I see the origins of such pain) begin to speak (and listen!) to one another, and their process of reconciliation now proceeds more freely. Simply by keeping one’s personas talking truthfully and listening respectfully to each other, the counselor helps one create (one hopes) an IROG. But notice that the IROG is one’s own, not the therapist’s. The therapist’s role is not to impose an IROG but to create a space in which one can create it oneself.

Let me turn now to the connection between pressure and love. What I have called pressure needs to be understood in contradistinction to abuse. Pressure occurs when two conditions are satisfied: the pressure must be applied in a way that calls forth the pain of a true rigidity to the surface, and it must be applied only to the degree that the person is able to fully experience the pain. Let me flesh out this definition in terms of my masseuse – Ann – working on me. Ann feels for the rigidities of muscular tension; she does not try, for example, to twist my arm painfully behind my back. True, my arm is indeed rigid when twisted that way, but it’s not a rigidity I need or seek to overcome unless I plan a career as a contortionist. Ann also tries to manipulate my muscles in *direct* opposition to the rigidity, creating the precise pain I need to

experience. In the muscles along my spine, for example, she presses either into my body or along my spine; she doesn't press laterally. True, lateral pressure does hurt, but the pain is a confusing combination of the pain of chronic tension, which I probably need to give up, and the pain that says, "Uh-oh – damage ahead". It isn't possible (at least not for me, apparently) to let go of the first pain while keeping the second.

The second condition for pressure – using an appropriate degree of it – is easily described. To let me experience the pain and let go of it, Ann must press not just at the right place but also with the right degree of force. Too light, and I won't be able to experience the pain so as to let go of it. Too heavy, and my body screams, "Get me out of here", so that I merely avoid the pain (as usual) instead of letting it go. I need to feel the pain *and* believe my body is safe *and* believe that Ann won't push me beyond where I can be pushed. Well, maybe a little beyond, but still mindful of whether I'm shutting down. Only then can I relax around the pain. To help Ann, I let her know what's happening: too much pressure, not enough, wrong place, wrong manipulation, and so on, saying these not as criticism but rather as part of a dance – a dance where neither partner leads, I should add. And I trust her to take my comments as simple feedback, not criticism.

In short, in order to do massage well, Ann has to know me well, well enough to know where and how I carry my chronic tension and where and how to call that precise tension to the surface. I call that love, not sexual love, obviously, nor even *agape*, but a straightforward caring for me in the most fundamental sense.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>And when I pay for a massage, I'm not paying for that caring; I'm paying because Ann needs to make money to survive. I go to her because of who she is, and I pay her to support that. (Points of view very similar to this appear in two other essays, "[the sort of person who ...](#)" and

Let me now transfer these images over to psychotherapy. As with massage, so also with psychotherapy do I look for the therapist's pressure satisfying two conditions: that the pressure be applied to issues that are in fact my rigidities, and that it be applied only to the degree that lets me experience the pain and yet not shut down. I therefore count on my therapist (Chris) to notice rigidities, places where my personas are locked in combat, and to push on them precisely. I also trust him to listen to my feedback about my experience: Is this a true rigidity or a reasonable response to the half-objective realities I face?<sup>3</sup> Is this the real rigidity, or can I help Chris to characterize and explore it more precisely (analogous to Ann not pushing laterally on the muscles next to my spine). Am I able to continue experiencing this conflict now, or am I shutting down? Or, contrariwise, is Chris letting me off the hook too easily? In all of this I count on Chris's care for me: to push on my limits and even beyond them a bit, and still to care for and respect me enough that we are in a cooperative dance, not a battle. As with massage, this sort of pressure seems appropriately termed love – it is not my dependence on his counseling beyond our sessions, and it is not his dependence on my neediness.<sup>4</sup>

In both massage and psychotherapy, then – and, I believe, in all our relationships with one another –, pressure is an important way we love each other, pressure of the careful and sensitive form I have described, pressure as distinguished from abuse.

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[“A Philosophy of Sex Work”](#), q.v.)

<sup>3</sup>This is analogous to Ann not twisting my arm. But the distinction between an unhealthy rigidity and a healthy respect for one's environment is not as easy to make as figuring out if my arm is meant to twist in that direction.

<sup>4</sup>And, as with Ann, I don't pay Chris for this love but for his time. If the love weren't there, Chris wouldn't have me as a client, quite apart from the fact that I wouldn't have him as a counselor. Whatever our relationship, the remains that he has bills to pay too.