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HOW WE MAKE CONTACT ... AND WHY IT IS SO DIFFICULT?

UNDERSTANDING HUMAN CONTACT

Connection and social interaction is the essence of any therapeutic communication. More importantly, it is also the essence of any and all human interaction! Most of the time we are not aware of how we make contact.

Your business deals, your marriage, your social life, the connection with your kids, even your ability to play sports are based on a very complex set of brain-body interactions. They are hardwired into us and govern every aspect of our social behavior!

Contact and social interaction should be easy! But it is usually not. This is because three separate and extremely powerful aspects of our brain are collaborating and interacting here. The 1) "primitive brain", 2) "emotional" brain and the 3) "rational" brain together are responsible for how we perceive our environment, how we show up in the world, how we feel about ourselves, and how we interact with others!

THREE DIFFERENT BRAINS IN ONE HEAD? NO WONDER!

These three brains are extremely different in developmental age and general functioning. It is just like joining the hardware and software of three generations of computers! (Good luck trying our computers can't even understand the software written 5 years ago!)

These three aspects of your brain are the basis of the "Triune Brain" theory by neurologist Paul MacLean. It is currently a hot item in understanding human-to-human interaction and relationships. (We will discuss details and the powerful practical implications of this theory in another article.)

You can imagine, as much as it is a great miracle that we function the way we do, many of our relationship difficulties come from the discrepancies and discontinuities in our body-brain connection!

WHY CONNECTING IS SO HARD (FOR SOME OF US...)

No wonder why connecting with another person is so hard! You may guess that understanding these systems may have great importance for both, client and therapist. Much of modern psychotherapy focuses on helping clients understand and regulate their three brains. I believe that knowledge is power. This is why I offer this information. It may enhance a client's understanding of themselves, as well as augment the tool box of psychotherapists who are open to mind-body work.

Besides the "three brains" that we must learn to coordinate and regulate we are also under the influence another system that is necessary to assess our relationships and human-to-human connections. It is an advanced evolutionary survival system that is linked to our Autonomic Nervous System and has to do with making and tracking connections.

WHY WE MAKE EYE CONTACT & THE ADVANTAGE OF READING PEOPLE'S FACES

In the last newsletter we discussed the basics of the Autonomic Nervous System (see Newsletter from last month). This month we will continue this conversation and focus on the role of something called the "Social Vagus". It is based on the **Polyvagal Theory** postulated by Stephen Porges, PhD. It has to do

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with connecting and "orienting" to others through movement, mimicry (facial tone), eye contact and tone of voice. It is also intimately associated with our modulating our heart rate and our breathing. All this is an evolutionary development designed to help mammals to connect for social support and to calm each other. On a human level it helps us to "read" people (facial mimicry, posture, tone of voice) to help us decide if we will be safe or sorry when we reach out and connect with someone.

As we have discussed in the November Newsletter, the Autonomic Nervous system essentially consists of two major branches. The sympathetic nervous system is in charge of stress responses like increased heart rate and breathing to bring more oxygen to the muscles for faster movement and the brain for sharper decision making. Whereas responses at the parasympathetic level would more likely be about slowing down the organism for rest and nurturing. Under extreme and overwhelming stress it is responsible for our freezing in fear, or playing possum. Collapse, splitting (dissociation), depression and catatonia are states associated with this.

The vagus nerve, the longest of the twelve pairs of cranial nerves that originate in the brain, has also functions in the larynx, diaphragm, heart and stomach as well as sensory functions in the ears and tongue. It connects brain, heart and gut and this is where **Stephen Porges, Ph.D.** focused his research. He moved on to combining this knowledge with phylogeny, the study of the evolution of living organisms. From this research he developed the **POLY-VAGAL THEORY**. The Vagus Nerve in humans evolved to create a third, advanced section of the autonomic nervous system set: The "social vagus".

SUMMARY & OUTLOOK

In this installment you have learned how the coordination and synchronization of three very diverse aspects of our brain both 1) signify our highest social evolution as human beings and 2) spell trouble within ourselves and with our connection to others. We also started to discuss the Poly-vagal Theory, explaining how we depend on community for our safety and the mechanisms that allow us to make human-to-human contact .

There is so much more to say about various aspects and ramifications of this!

In our next issue you will learn about.....

- Why mothers talk funny and babies smile (On the Poly-vagal Theory in action)
- Why our bodies get stiff and our postures get out of shape (On the neurophysiology Charcter Structure)
- Why I make my clients dance (On how movement heals), and.....
- How your body remembers its story (On The essence of Body-Psychotherapy)

Please join us next month!

Kuno Bachbauer



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Please note: The article in this section has been adapted from a lecture that I have presented a few years ago. I was addressing the D.C. Guild of Body Psychotherapists. My colleague **Catherine Edwards** wrote and published a summary of this event in the D.C. Guild Newsletter. I have used her basic outline and updated it for for the purposes of this newsletter article.

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