

Article : The Principles of the Trager® approach Part I

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THE PRINCIPLES OF THE TRAGER® APPROACH

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"Alas, our theory is too poor for experience"--Albert Einstein "No, no! Experience is too rich for our theory"--Niels Bohr

To commit the principles of Milton Trager's approach to the linear and neatly subdivided printed page is to automatically exclude the effective expression of one essential principle: it is at the core a feeling experience. Milton has little faith in the capacity of the written or the spoken word to convey the feeling at the heart of his work. "Put enough words together and you have a book," he swiftly summarizes his bleak view of the value of words in truly understanding that experience. Yet the spread of his work to the larger community, where words and explanations are critically important, has been slowed by the lack of an organized and systematic elaboration of its underpinnings. Milton views verbal exposition of his approach as useful only to the extent that it stimulates people to seek out the feeling experience embodied in the work.

The description in this chapter, then, is presented for that purpose, and to assist the reader in understanding how the realm of feeling can produce positive changes in health, well being, and medical practice. The principles will be divided into five sections: The Approach; The Sources of Change; The Source of Problems; How the Process Works; and Technique. Technique is presented last because Milton considers it less important than other aspects of the work and because it cannot be learned adequately from a book.

THE APPROACH

Trager work is an approach to people and their problems, rather than a method that can be learned by memorizing facts, procedures, symptoms or remedies. The approach of the practitioner is the same regardless of the problem, symptom, or diagnosis of the receiver. At the same time, each person's individuality is fully and intimately appreciated because the practitioner directly feels the physical tissue and its responses. Every word, gesture, and touch of the practitioner, every aspect of the relationship with the receiver, is meant to convey and evoke the desired outcomes.

"It is the manner in which I touch," says Milton, not the technique, which is important. To an extent unusual in therapeutic work, practitioners must embody the very qualities they wish to convey to and nurture in the receiver. Thus practitioners can be successful

only to the degree that they have developed themselves. The approach is easy, light, soft, and free, and gracefully moving. It is not goal oriented. The practitioner enquires, expecting an answer but never demanding one, "How should it be...?"

THE SOURCES OF CHANGE

The Life-Giving Force

Individual practitioners do not produce change. Rather, they tap into a life-giving, life-enhancing, life-regulating, vibratory force or energy, far greater than the individual, which surrounds us, ever-present, nearby and accessible to both practitioner and receiver. Whether one names that energy life spirit, God, Chi, or creative inspiration does not matter; the source is non-sectarian, the name unimportant. It is the source of human sustenance, of homeostasis and healing, and thus also of change.

To draw a parallel from what is known in physics, we are surrounded by vibratory waves of many kinds, such as gravitational, subatomic particle, light, and sound waves. Vibrational energy at regular frequencies, when applied to physical particles, can organize them into beautifully ordered patterns called standing waves. Structures in which standing waves are present vibrate at their most natural and easily sustained frequency. Such structures are said to be in resonance. When another similar structure, or oscillator, vibrates at the same frequency, the energy transfer between them is optimal and they form a perfectly articulated resonant system.

Hook-up

The Trager practitioner, and any other person, can tap into this vibratory energy or force by adopting a meditative state which Milton refers to as "hook-up." He makes no distinction between this state and deep meditation, and he insists that it is only from this state that effective work can emerge. The practitioner's development also advances whenever he or she is in that state. The feeling of deep peace that comes from being fully absorbed in watching a beautiful sunset or a newborn baby are other everyday examples of hook-up.

The practitioner waits until he or she enters this state before beginning to work on another person, and seeks to stay in this state throughout the work. In such a state, the practitioner is able to be intuitive, creative, dynamic, alive and vibrant, peaceful but not passive. It is an altered state in which resources greater than those contained within the conscious thinking mind are accessible, similar to the way a person may use hypnosis or visualization or dreaming states to reach internal resources beyond thought and analysis.

Practitioner as Channel

The practitioner, in an altered yet connected state, feels the receiver's body in motion and at rest and engages in a self-enquiry. What are the qualities of softness, lightness, ease, freedom of movement, and vibrancy? How should the body feel? How should it move?

How should it be? The answers are relayed through the practitioner's mind--as feelings--to the mind of the receiver, and the body changes accordingly, to the extent that the connection between the two is realized. Although the hands of the practitioner touch the receiver's body, it is the mind of the practitioner and that of the receiver feeling the information flow which allows the body to change.

The practitioner's goals, thoughts, ambitions, and analyses must be put out of the way, because none of them can make a fundamental change in the other person. "I'm just there," says Milton. "I'm lucky." To his students he says, "Be there with the person. You stay out of it."

Returning to parallels in the field of physics, one can say that the practitioner, tuned to a desirable frequency through the state of hook-up, forms a resonant system with the receiver, and there follows an optimal transfer of energy. The relationship between the two is thus essential. As the physicist Henry Stapp said of the elementary subatomic particle, "It is, in essence, a set of relationships that reach outward to other things."

The Mind

The mind records the experiences of individuals throughout their lifetime: perceptions of the external environment, internal sensations, physical activities, and emotions. Patterns of response develop unconsciously, particularly those connected to feeling states, and the memory of these former experiences arises in realms beyond conscious thought. Response patterns include bodily motions, all of which involve muscle action. But the muscle tissue does not act independently.

Whether the responses are reflexive, as when a baby develops balance and coordination by responding to neuronal messages transmitted from the contact of the feet with the ground, modifying its response until it can stand and move forward, or whether they are voluntary, as when one purposefully raises an arm to reach an object, they originate in signals sent to and from the central nervous system. Emotion-activated responses likewise originate from processes within the mind.

THE SOURCE OF PROBLEMS

Learning Harmful Patterns

Response patterns may be learned or conditioned, or they may be brought about by biological stress, in what Hans Selye called the General Adaptation Syndrome, wherein very similar bodily events take place in response to a host of very different stressors. An individual may develop response patterns which initially were necessary for survival or for maintaining homeostasis but which later become unnecessary and even harmful.

A given individual may also develop problematic response patterns due to abnormalities or damage in the physical, psychological/emotional, or spiritual domains. In the physical domain, accidents or other injuries may alter response capabilities by producing direct

organic harm. Genetic or other systemic abnormalities may also prevent or alter bodily responses. Furthermore, the body may compensate for such damage in a way that over time may produce additional damage. For example, people favoring an injured knee may alter their walk protectively in such a way that they develop hip or back pain. And both of these mechanisms--the direct injury and its compensations--can alter responses to other external and internal stimuli which have nothing to do with the original damage or its compensatory sequelae.

Emotions such as anxiety, fear, depression, or anger likewise produce characteristic response patterns with bodily correlates. People in such states, in fact, are rather easily recognized by their body language and expressions. When these emotions become fixed or chronic in an individual, harmful psychological and physical patterns may result. The weakness and hopelessness characteristic of spiritual loss--although it may be given other names--may likewise be visible in alterations of response and in abnormal patterns of physical and psychological behavior.

Muscle Tension

Perhaps the simplest way to generalize about many of the bodily alterations described above is to think of them as producing changes in the state of tension in the muscles and connective tissue. While hormones and other biochemicals are involved in such changes, much of the net effect can be seen in muscle activity. Comprising the greatest single component of the body's mass, muscle not only holds the body together and powers all of its movements but also pumps the oxygen-rich blood which feeds the cells, and it regulates the flow of blood in the arteries which it lines.

Without the muscles which keep the eyes moving we could not see. Without the muscular peristaltic motion of the gastrointestinal tract we could not digest and eliminate. Muscles have a resting tone and they also contract and relax to produce their actions in the body. If the resting tone or the coordinated contraction and relaxation of muscle tissues are inappropriate to the needs of the person, problems inevitably develop.

Excess muscle tension may, for example, produce constricted arteries, pain, discomfort, imbalance, loss of body movements or dysfunctional body movements, and excessive response to messages from the external and internal environment, in an escalating or vicious cycle.

Insufficient tension may also produce imbalance, loss of body movements or dysfunctional body movements, as well as weakness and inadequate perception and response to messages from the internal and external environment.

The state of tension, then, is a response to the inner and outer environment which may be conditioned and patterned by past events and perceptions. The barriers to positive change lie in the mental response patterns which produce the muscle response, and those barriers are composed of past physical, emotional/psychological, and spiritual events.

Trying to alter patterns of tension by the use of great personal effort frequently adds to problems. Where there is already excessive tension, using effort only reinforces the pattern of too much activity. Where there is insufficient tension, great effort overpowers the diminished capacity of the body to perceive a stimulus and mount a response to it.

HOW THE PROCESS WORKS

Breaking Patterns

"Nothing can change until the old pattern is broken," says Milton. To mount appropriate and life-enhancing responses to messages from inside the body and from the outside world, one must first break the old response patterns. But the breaking need not be a violent, aggressive act, and it should not be when the old pattern is one of excess tension, because such violence only reinforces the use of excessive effort to maintain the homeostasis of the body. Working "hard" creates and sustains tension. There may be temporary relief when the body and mind are worked to the point of exhaustion, but the fundamental pattern is not changed in this way.

Even when the old pattern is one of too little response--too little tension--as in paralysis or other conditions where weakness predominates, trying hard produces more tension than the weakened tissues are able to respond to. First, the practitioner must help the receiver to perceive small external and internal sensations and to develop a minimal response to that smallest of stimuli. Once a minimal response is elicited, the old pattern is broken and the new pattern can be bolstered and built on.