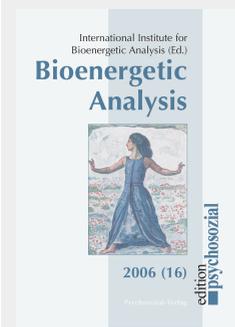


Michael Maley

Shock, Trauma, and Polarization: Finding Unity in a World of Dualities



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Michael Maley

Summary

Polarization and disconnection represent the most difficult and harmful threat to our life force and vitality and are often at the core of our client's symptoms. This paper discusses two of the most polarized emotional states we encounter in our clinical work – shame and trauma – and some ways to view the healing of those states.

Keywords: Shock Trauma, Shame, Polarization

Introduction

The question under consideration is how we go about finding unity in a world in which there is so much polarization. We seem to be surrounded by people and institutions taking rather fixed positions over issues and at the same time making the other pole or position less than valid, wrong, bad, or misguided. We know the term polarization – it means to be fixed on one side of an issue, feeling opposed to the other side, and unwilling to move toward the other position. Polarization occurs when only one side of a duality is embraced. Most conflict resolution strategies are designed to bring people out of these polarized positions, to get them to see the needs of the other side, and to maybe change their position so the two sides can either communicate better or ideally, form a third position where the participants can be successful in getting some of their needs met by each other.

I would like to do three things in this paper: (1) I want to explore some ideas about polarization, duality, energy pulsations, and how the »reconciliation of opposites« in order to experience unity is one of the most powerful healing principles we have to work with; (2) I'd like to look at two emotional states that have the capacity to deeply polarize us – shame and trauma – and, that when these are present in the body and mind, it predisposes us to act and feel in polarized ways; and (3) I want to show how many of our bioen-

ergetic interventions are based on the capacity to hold and transcend opposites and settle into, and feel, some of the most fundamental pulsations of the life process.

Polarization and Pulsation

Polarized positions are very much a part of our culture and language. They are pretty normal and in many groups and many families it is the norm to be one sided. Dualities, when you see them, are treated as choices – you have to choose the side you're on and the other side is avoided or judged. Life is good, death is bad / Love is good, pain is bad / strength is good, vulnerability and weakness are bad. How relatively few groups and individuals are able to see beyond polarization and offer us examples of unity and show us how to attain those states of consciousness where we can see farther than just the single side of an issue ...

Polarization is related to a phenomenon in therapy that we deal with all the time – the experience of disconnection. Disconnection from ourselves and our feelings, from our bodies, from others, and from what is happening around us, is one of the most damaging aspects of our experience as human beings. Disconnection comes from being numb, it creates numbing, and pulls us away from the life of our bodies and our relationships. Polarization and disconnection are one in the same, because when we polarize over any issue, we stop engaging in a natural pulsation between two energetic states that need each other to stay fresh and alive. What would you be like if you only received, and never gave (or vice versa)? What would you be like if you said only yes, and never no? We know some of this from our clients – many of them do exactly that, and their life energy suffers from the lack of rejuvenation that comes with living out the cycles. One side of anything feels dead without the other, and it's important to look at how that is happening in people and how we can help them get back into a more life-enhancing pattern.

What you are looking at in Figure 1 is familiar to you – the Taoist symbol called the Yin-Yang. It summarizes the quality of unity in the physical world. It also reflects the fact that the physical world is a dual world – everything has its opposite – and that unity in our world at any level, appears to require that we learn to reconcile opposites. Unity, in this symbol and in our experience, happens when we can experience a pulsation, a blending, or a synthesis between two opposites.



If you look at the list in Figure 1, you see just a few of the universe of pulsations. Some are about the physical world – light and darkness, up and down, hot and cold – we get used to holding these because they are mostly value free and we can sort of see how they pulsate together and co-exist easily. We slide between these somewhat gracefully and so we can hold them both in our consciousness. A couple of these are psychological – conscious and unconscious, power and powerless, fear and love, happiness and sadness. In that realm we start to have judgments about the experience and begin to think that one is better than the other and that we should try to cultivate one and not the other. Once we add emotions to a duality, polarization becomes more likely. A couple of the others are more abstract and have spiritual tones to them ... good and evil / existence and non-existence. Some dualities are difficult to embrace – they have a certain resonance with us, but are hard to wrap around, not because we judge one or the other, but because it takes a certain state of consciousness to understand how they pulsate and it's hard to resonate with one or the other pole. If you are able to embrace existence, how do you resonate with non-existence unless you can let go of your ego and your identity completely and be a part of something much greater. Some schizoid clients, can embrace non-existence much more easily, and have difficulty with existence as a felt state.

Lists like these, and there are literally hundreds of these pulsations that can be named and connected to, are very interesting because they show us all the opportunities we have to experience unity. That is each one of these dualities is an opportunity for us to experience a natural pulsation in the world and embrace a flow of energy. They also show us all the ways in which we can polarize our experience and not feel the flow.

It is so easy to think and behave in polarized ways because:

- (1) The physical world is characterized by dualities and the pulsations between them – the opportunity to polarize is everywhere.
- (2) We are taught to polarize. Polarization is taught everywhere, experienced everywhere, with few exceptions. It's much easier to think and act in polarized ways because of all the modeling and the lack of teaching how to do otherwise. It's much more difficult to reconcile opposites because they require us to seek them out and work to feel the differences. Unity requires effort.
- (3) We and our clients get caught in emotional states that can become highly polarized and unless these are resolved, it's very difficult to practice and pursue unitive experiences.

So, the human condition and its attendant suffering is based on polarization. Too much or too little, the most basic quality of a system in polarization, describes all basic states of illness, emotional disorders, and spiritual dilemmas.

As the symbol depicts, for unity to be experienced, one pole becomes or cycles around to include the other, one pole emerges out of the depth of the other pole, one pole contains the other pole, and one pole is known by our experience with the other pole. So we become wise, by embracing opposites, by living in these pulsations and by fostering the connection between opposite polarities. So unity comes about by blending and connecting opposites in a way where neither one is erased.

In bioenergetic work, we constantly work within the framework of opposites, and there are many of these that comprise the heart of our process work. Expanding out and gathering in – are opposites. Giving and receiving, rest and work, expression and containment, holding back and letting go, thinking and feeling, male and female, life and death. Every process that I could think of in which we engage with our clients to assist them in moving their energy begins in a polarized state and becomes a pulsation. Our therapeutic work is about helping our clients embrace all of these pulsations in their lives. As a therapy, we are about psychosomatic unity achieved by embracing opposites. We »fall off the unity wagon«, so to speak, when the pulsation gets stopped or blocked, and we end up in one end or the other of the opposite and we stay there feeling and thinking that this is who we are, this is the safest alternative, or this is the RIGHT place to be.

Shame, Shock and Trauma

There are a number of ways that these polarizations are uncovered ... if you add charge to a biological system, you will highlight its polarized state – you will quickly see where the system is invested – energy flows in paths of least resistance and polarized states are usually well practiced. This is why body work is so revealing of the basic stuck positions of character and offers so much in bringing unconscious material to the surface. This is why the decision as to the amount of charge added to a body is so important = the more polarized the system, the less charge is needed to highlight the polarization.

There are two highly polarized emotional states that show up almost immediately when somatic work is introduced – those states – the emotion of shame and the experience of shock/trauma – come up so quickly because these two emotional positions involve a breaking down of pulsation in some very fundamental dualities that are part of normal development and without which development cannot proceed.

These positions have been described by Robert Jay Lifton in one of his earlier texts – *On Death and the Continuity of Life* (1979) – and interestingly, are strongly involved in the imagery of death – those were:

The pulsation between Connection & Separation
The pulsation between Integrity & Disintegration
And, the pulsation between Movement & Stasis

These pulsations, when active and alive, and operating such that the person can have both experiences, supports development throughout the lifespan.

We expand outward and connect and then retreat into ourselves and are alone. Connection and separation, when not disturbed become the flow of life between ourselves, others, and our world and many energetic pulsations become part of that flow – giving and receiving, expression and containment, and so on. When they are disturbed, then we see the patterns of codependence or isolation and a subsequent loss of energy and life.

The second pulsation – Integrity and Disintegration, is fundamental to being able to change. With the help of good connections with others, we gather ourselves together (we organize ourselves) and then fall apart, feel formless for a time, and then reorganize again – the basic movements in the formation of the self. When this process is disturbed as a consequence of the injuries of trauma, the capacity to form ourselves in response to our experience is damaged and we stop developing.

The third pulsation Movement & Stasis involves the capacity to move and then become still, not in fear, but by choice – all in ways that are organic and inwardly paced. Many clients have this pulsation disturbed – they hold back and cannot let go, they work too hard and cannot rest, or as we’ll see in trauma, they freeze in fear and cannot move freely.

When these pulsations get interrupted and not recovered, we stop growing, and get stuck in one mode or the other excessively. This is our disconnection from ourselves – the polarized states. We can fall off the wheel of life whenever these pulsations are not supported, and we cannot tolerate the anxiety that occurs, and begin to organize a defensive response.

As you can see in the second illustration, the experience of shame and the experience of trauma involve a disturbance in these fundamental pulsations. It’s an indicator of how destructive these emotional states can be that they involve these three polarities – it makes these states in their chronic and extreme form contain both the imagery and the feeling of dying, in that they represent a powerful polarization of our body and our emotions ...

Shame	Trauma
connection – separation	integrity – desintegration
»death	»death«
numbing – collapse	numbing – freezing
wordlessness	wordlessness
»cognitive shock«	»speechless terror«
implicit memory	implicit memory
withdrawal	immobility & dissociation

Shame especially involves a severing of the duality of connection–separation and has immobility from collapse.

Trauma creates a break in the pulsation between integrity-disintegration and has a powerful effect on the movement-stasis duality. Trauma involves immobility with fear and a loss of safety.

Both involve a process of numbing (central inhibitors) and a physiology of either collapse (as in shame) or freezing (as in trauma) and thus both create immobility

Shame

The affect of shame has been extensively studied by Donald Nathanson and his colleagues at the Silvan Tomkins Institute (Nathanson, 1992). They have found that a shame response (what he calls the shame affect) occurs whenever there is an interruption or an impediment to a positive affective outcome. At first, shame is a normal hardwired biological response to any interruption that occurs in what interests or excites you. It can be any stimulus that draws your attention – an interesting thing or your mothers face. If the connection does not happen you need something to stop your involvement – that something is the shame response (the affect). This affective shame response is a way of disconnecting from something that is not going to happen so you can move on to the next connection.

But the affect is only the first part of the response. Over time, repeated experiences of being denied what you need (or what interests you), create a *biography* and the *biology and biography* create the *emotion* of shame – a more diverse group of responses that can vary from a simple pattern of withdrawal to a much more elaborated and toxic set of experiences. If those interruptions were frequent and intense (you had a *strong* need *and* a *poor* response from your environment); if they involved the interruption of attachment, frustrations of achievements, failing to have your body work right, or how you wanted to be seen by others, then *strong* shame responses are created. If you were also told that your needs were inappropriate, or too much, or even bad, then the emotion of shame became toxic and you were stuck with no other option but to go into the family of defenses against feeling it. The shame becomes very hard to feel and handle and stay conscious, and defenses begin to form. These defensive patterns are known as the *compass of shame* and describe the four families of response that we use to *not feel* the shame affect and emotion. The bottom of the slide illustrates the compass – this is the four families of responses described by Nathanson that we use to get away from the experience of toxic shame:

1. **Withdrawal** – The classic shame pattern:
 - Rejection
 - Feeling Distanced
 - Isolated
 - Embarrassed
 - Humiliated

Head and Neck Slump
Eyes Droop and Turn Away
Upper Body Goes Limp
Face (Neck and Upper Chest) Become Red
All Communication is Lost (Cognitive Shock)

2. **Attack Self** – I’m bad or worthless, damaged or not enough, it’s my fault – the voice of the CRITIC.
3. **Avoidance** – I’ll do something to avoid the shame feeling – drink, act out, run away, or only do what I’m good at so I force recognition from others
4. **Attack Others** – I’ll blame, criticize or bully you so I feel powerful and not diminished – road rage, schoolyard bullies, recent incidents of school shootings all have this pattern in common

Because shame started out biologically as a way to disconnect from a lack of connection (to »face« elsewhere), it can easily become a feature of our disconnection patterns. As you can surmise, it features highly in the attachment issues that David Campbell talked about at the IIBA conference, Cape Cod, in May 2005 and in the violent behaviors that can come out of a defense against shame based on attack others. It is the most important affect of all in disconnection and once in place leaves the person in a polarized state – having only disconnection as the option, instead of a pulsation between connection and separation. Once the pattern is set, reconnection cannot be done without help. To reconnect, someone has to work hard to get past the defense, to help you feel the shame, and to help you choose how to reconnect even when not feeling very good about yourself because of the shame. Someone has to help you embrace both poles of the connection-separation duality so you can restore the pulsation. Something else has to engage you so you can reenter the neural states that support connection and interest in the world. Even more than trauma, shame is the most subtle of the polarized states and can stay unconscious so long. It involves the earliest and most vulnerable connections in our lives and has a long time to build.

Trauma

The trauma response is well known to most of you, since we have been studying and working with it for many years. Shock/trauma is a term used to describe the deep levels of freezing and immobilization that can occur when an individual experiences a great threat to their sense of safety and cannot respond in either flight or fight. In Figure 4, I have summarized some of the work of Dr. Stephan Porges of the University of Chicago. Dr. Porges has proposed a model that suggests that instead of the familiar two branches of the ANS (the sympathetic – fight or flight, and parasympathetic – relaxation and digestion) response systems, there are actually three different systems and modes of operation (Porges, S. 2003, 2004). He calls these systems vagal systems since the vagus nerve is one of primary transmission routes of neural firing. These three branches of the ANS and Polyvagal Theory describe how the mammalian nervous system has evolved and has had three developmental stages – immobilization (the most primitive part of the system); mobilization (the familiar fight or flight response; and social communication or social engagement (the most recently evolved part of the ANS and the one mediating the attachment behaviors that connect us to our world).

TRAUMA

Polyvagal Theory: Phylogenetic stages of Neural Control

1. Immobilization

- Feigning death, behavioral shutdown
- The most primitive component, shared with most vertebrates.
- Dependent on the oldest branch of the vagus nerve (an unmyelinated portion originating in an area of the brain stem known as the dorsal motor nucleus of the vagus).

Neuroception of Safety promotes growth, health and social behavior

2. Mobilization

- Fight-flight behaviors
- Dependent on the functioning of the sympathetic nervous system, a system associated with increasing metabolic activity and increasing cardiac output (e.g., faster heart rate, greater ability of the heart to contract).

Neuroception of Danger promotes hypervigilance and defensiveness compromises normal development

3. Social communication or social engagement

- Facial expression, vocalization, listening.
- Dependent on the myelinated vaus, which originates in an area of the brain stem known as the nucleus ambiguus. The myelinated vagus fosters calm behavioral states by inhibiting the influence of the sympathetic nervous system on the heart.

Neuroception of Life Threat promotes a behavioral shutdown to conserve metabolic resources

The Social Engagement System, is the part of the ANS that allows self-soothing and calming, attachment, the ability to sense and feel danger, read facial expressions, and listen to the qualities of the human voice. This branch of the ANS has the capacity to inhibit mobilization responses and allows social connection.

The Mobilization or active avoidance system is the familiar fight or flight response in which the body is activated and ready to respond to provide safety or protection.

The Immobilization Freezing Response that can occur in trauma represents a violation of safety and a threat to life and moves the system into immobilization with fear. This is the most polarized system in the brain – the one in which the preservation of metabolic life takes precedence over everything else and the system that is the most fluid, the most connective, and the most involved in social behavior is inhibited. This part of the ANS is most closely related to the reptilian brain – a nervous system that does not contain the social behaviors or brain structures that allow attachment and social communication. In mammals, this system becomes activated when there is no choice except biological survival. It is the response to an injury to the brain, and is a deeply physiological and emotional insult.

When this biological system is activated and chronically mobilized, the body is not able to feel the connections of others, is not able to discern the subtleties of the human voice and face, and is not able to look, speak, or listen in ways that make communication facile and sensitive. Like chronic shame this is a deeply polarized state and difficult to emerge from unless assisted from outside.

These two states, one disengaged and one broken, represent the deepest kinds of polarization we see in therapy and when present, leave the individual in a state of permanent loss of the capacity for unity. The ability to experience any duality – especially in a bodily way – is severely compromised and represents a very sad loss of what is possible emotionally and spiritually.

Healing occurs when something else is brought to the polarized system so it can move out of the looping and into a state of connection. Bringing the energetic charge through the system will often highlight the polarization quite well – the connection to a non-polarized brain system is often required beyond that to implement healing. For example, in the case of shame, the outside connection is able to bring you affirmations of your inherent worth, acceptance of who you are and what you wanted; and the tools to contain the shame response, and help you restore the pulsation between connection and separation.

In trauma, the therapeutic connection can help bring safety and the tools necessary to not be overwhelmed by the experience once again. These tools include being able to contain the freezing response, work with it consciously, and feel the mobilization that lies underneath it. The duality of integration – disintegration can be restored through the mechanism that we all know about – connection. Again, it is the connection with others and the learning of skills and tools inherent in the social engagement system that brings the nervous system, first, back through mobilization, and then into social engagement.

I had said earlier that one of the archetypes of the healing process was the resolution of polarities – that when we experience that happening either in ourselves or others, it inspires us, shows us an example of unity and draws us toward it.

Healing and Transcending Polarization

One interesting example of this was in the recent death and funeral of Pope John Paul II. It became a worldwide event and created an enormous amount of coming together and inspiration for millions of people, even non-Catholics. One experience we all had in the last few months was a close look at the way in which he approached death – fully living every moment into his death. He provided another example of unity in the way he handled his pain and kept on with his labor of love in spite of his body failing him. When we see these enormously difficult dualities being faced and experienced, we are inspired and healed ourselves. We see a way to be that helps us know how to move through our own experience in a unitive way. Being a part of a conscious death; seeing someone walk through pain and still be loving to others; being with someone who can stay connected to an organizing center even though their life is coming apart, are all examples of how dualities can be lived and experienced without polarization.

If you look at Figure 5, you will see how there are lots of interesting examples of how that principle works in Bioenergetic work. In Bioenergetic Analysis and somatic work, most of the interventions we use directly involves working with pulsations:



Bioenergetic Polarities

Find the opposite pole and strengthen it ...

Find the emergent healing moment and bring it out

- completing the frozen movement and support its emergence
- follow the instroke of the frozen breathing wave
- complete the blocked responses in the body
- exaggerate the contraction
- pendulation from the trauma vortex to the healing vortex in trauma work

»the way out is through«

Past and present

Connection and separation

Expansion and gathering

Saying no and saying yes

Expression and containment

Giving and receiving

Inbreath and outbreath

Grounding and reaching upwards

Masculine and feminine

Reason thinking and emotions

(head and heart)

Active and passive

Fear and peace

Dependence and independence

Knowledge and ignorance

Powerful and powerless

Conscious and unconscious



There is one other symbol in Figure 5 based on polarities – that of a Labyrinth. One of the functions of these structures is to help the person resolve internal conflicts, and you can see that it is a walk based on alternating movement patterns – turn left, turn right, periphery to center, center to periphery.

Finally, in this last list, we have a very powerful principle of healing based on the resolution of polarities by embracing both poles of the pulsation:

- Embrace both poles – in every position you take, see its opposite.
- Experience the pulsation between the poles – hold both sides in your consciousness.

- > See if you can find the emergent qualities that were lost in the polarization.
- > Feel the yes in your no, and feel the no in your yes.
- > Discover what you receive when you give, or what is given when you fully receive something.
- > Find the knowledge in your ignorance, and the ignorance in your knowledge.
- > Look for the strengths in your weaknesses, and the weaknesses in your strengths.
- > Look for the dependency in your independence.
- > Look for the light in your darkness.

Each time we do even one of these, we gain the momentum and capacity to do others. As we know from our clinical experience, working with those dualities at the level of the body, removing shame and healing trauma, forms a foundation for being able to see and embrace many other dualities that form the foundations of our spiritual development.

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About the Author

Michael J. Maley, Ph.D. is a senior trainer with the IIBA and is currently coordinating training groups in Atlantic Canada and New Zealand.

Michael Maley, Ph.D.
2717 Hidden Creek Lane
Wayzata, MN 55391
maley001 @ tc.umn.edu
Michael.J.Maley-1 @ tc.umn.edu