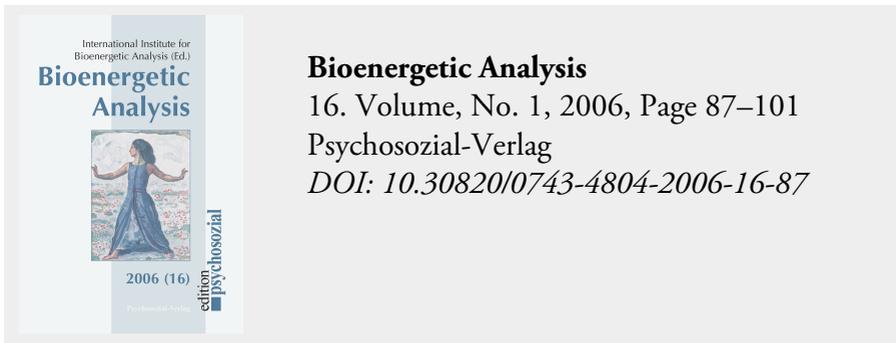


Diana Guest

Bioenergetics and a Paradoxical View of Sexuality: how characterological development is related to current erotic life!



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Bioenergetics and a Paradoxical View of Sexuality: how Characterological Development is Related to Current Erotic Life!

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Summary

Sexual health is one of the main priorities of Bioenergetic Analysis. This article explores and introduces a useful adjunct to bioenergetic therapy by blending a new paradigm of sexual erotic development with traditional characterological and bioenergetic perspectives. The author shares her discoveries regarding the relationship between core erotic themes and characterological issues.

Keywords: Sexuality, Bioenergetic Analysis, sexual erotic development, characterological issues, personality

I find in my practice more and more people coming to me concerned about their sexual behavior or that of their partner. This may be because I am known in the community as specializing in sexual compulsivity but I also think this is a trend as more and more people are using the Internet as a sexual outlet. In my work with clients who experience problematic sexual behavior and especially those with compulsive behavior, I have found that using a paradigm that sees sexual behaviors as a way to work through childhood traumas and deficits extremely helpful. Doing so helps me frame the erotic character development of the client more readily by not hastily moving into a judgment about it being »normal« or pathological. I want to share this approach of incorporating a new paradigm within our more traditional bioenergetic model as an additional component of treatment on the pathway to sexual health. I also hope to invite a dialogue about the integrating of this paradoxical model with our understanding of character structure. Can this theoretical construct with clinical implications directly inform our work with clients and assist us in promoting a sex-positive model of health?

In reviewing how we got here, Reich's model was based on libidinal energy and he believed that sex is central to our social life as well as our individual

inner life (Sharaf 1983). Reich developed the concept of the orgasmic reflex as a goal for health. He saw sexual problems as the result of energetic disturbance, blocks, defenses and character armor (Reich 1971). Lowen (1965, 2004) started from this vantage point and observed that a person's emotional problems and sexual problems are a reflection of the same personality disturbance but went on to say that Reich's view of healthy sexuality lacked an important component. »What Reich did not emphasize enough is that this total body response is an expression of the individual's surrender to love« (Lowen 2004, p. 107). In his 1965 book *Love and Orgasm*, Lowen writes sex is love and that, »the objective of the sexual person is the satisfaction that derives from end pleasure, or orgasm« (p. 175).

This model stems from early psychoanalytic theory and perhaps too hastily polarizes sexual behavior and experiences into pathological and normal categories. This paradigm states that there is a right and wrong way to be sexual and any deviations from the norm warrant analysis. During the 1950's, when this theory originated, most analysts were Caucasian males who determined what was deviant based on their own conscious and unconscious erotic patterns and behaviors and Lowen tells us that his characterological struggle is around the surrendering to and opening of his heart. To Lowen (1965, 1988) sex is an expression of love. He writes in his autobiography (2004)

»The problem with sex is that it is meaningless without love. Its meaning is directly proportional to the amount of love that brings two people together in the act. Sex without love is like passing water. It offers relief, but no fulfillment« (p. 151).

My fear is that we are still operating from a pathological model and unconsciously shaming our clients when they do not fit into this model; that we are rushing to a diagnostic judgment that can work against therapy.

In the 1970's, Masters and Johnson emerged with their »neat and clean« view toward human sexual behaviors. They believed that sexual problems were due to a lack of accurate sex education, performance anxiety, and ignorance and inhibition from internalized religious and societal prohibitions. Treatment focused on the reduction and/or removal of anxiety, guilt and inhibition.

Bioenergetics has incorporated both the 1950's and 1970's models, and has expanded them by focusing on the body and addressing the relationship between breath, muscular contractions/expansion and pleasure in the body. As bioenergetic therapists we embrace paradox and invite aliveness and visceral pleasure. As a sex positive model our goal as clinicians is to provide a sup-

portive, safe and boundried container for exploration of sexuality and we encourage the identification and expression of deep feelings around sex including erotic transference and countertransference. However, the model is still a male heterosexual monogamous model that does not address sexual preference, views most sexual problems as Oedipally based, and is intercourse/orgasm focused. I also think it pathologizes people's erotic maps that do not fit a very specific framework.

I am not going to discuss in this article the issues of the heterosexual monogamous model but I do want to address sexuality as being developmental in nature in a broader sense. That includes seeing one's sexual arousal patterns as developmental in nature and emphasizing how the challenges of early life and relationships provide the building blocks for adult arousal. Lowen speaks to developmental issues as they effect the orgastic response in climax (2004) but he does not speak to them in relationship to arousal. I have not found discussion about arousal in the bioenergetic material and I think we are missing out. If I go back to Reich's (1971) work he does talk about arousal, fantasy, and masturbation. He writes that he made it a point to thoroughly investigate the fantasies that accompanied masturbation. I find as I work with my clients on their sexual beliefs and work to remove the pelvic blocks to increase the felt sense of pleasure that often there can still be a great deal of shame about their turn-ons, what it is that is arousing to them. We can learn a great deal about our clients by addressing their sexual fantasies and this can also give us a clue as to the developmental wounds that they are trying to heal through their sexual behavior.

When Lowen states that all mature sexuality is an expression of love, what does this say to someone who is not married or not in love, that they cannot attain healthy sexuality? Although I agree that the most meaningful sex is a deep expression of one's love for another, I want to expand that definition to say that it doesn't necessarily have to be an expression of love and can include the heart as a sense of well being/affection for the other and to state that mature sexuality is about an integrated state of aliveness in one's own body as expressed in a mutually satisfying sexual experience of sharing one's self, including the head, the heart, and the genitals, with another person.

We are usually trying to get people out of their heads and into their body, now I want us to see how the mind can contribute to building the charge and enhancing organismic aliveness. The goal is to widen the scope and to include instead of exclude. By using the paradoxical model and the four erotic cornerstones developed by Jack Morin (1995), we have another tool to reduce

shame and contractions, and help our clients along the road to sexual aliveness, pleasure, and satisfaction.

I ask the reader: What does the organism have to engage in as »foreplay« to enhance or become free to organismically surrender? What are the wounds that resulted in defenses both in psyche and soma that blended with orgasmic sexuality? How does fantasy (in the mind) enhance or inhibit organismic surrender?

Jack Morin's (1995) »paradoxical theory« views sex as intricate, mysterious, complicated, contradictory and unpredictable. Erotic experiences are viewed as potentially dangerous, joyous, troublesome and life-giving. This model links current compelling turn-ons with crucial challenges and difficulties from our past. Each of our individual »erotic maps« contains »core erotic themes« which determine what each of us find erotic or »turn-ons«. Sexuality is viewed as a journey of self-discovery. Core erotic themes, also called sexual preferences and lovemaps, are moderately resilient and stable over time and therefore not easily modifiable (Bader 2002; Money 1999). These can be seen as a way to honor what one had to do to hold onto one's sexual being, a part of one's psychic and somatic character structure, what one had to do to survive his/her environment.

Reich (1971) writes about his work with client's sexual fantasies and how this informed his development of his orgasm theory. He also writes about the importance of bringing the fantasies into consciousness because if they are not permitted into the conscious they remain disturbing and part of the psychic armoring. He goes on to talk about a »genuine transference« where the original object of the fantasy is transferred to the partner and »if the partner corresponds in his essential traits to the object of the fantasy, he can replace the object of the fantasy« (p. 86). It is my understanding of this that Reich also found working with arousal patterns and fantasy to be a useful component of understanding and working with his clients' internal sexual conflicts and wounding. This seems compatible with Morin's research.

Morin's paradoxical perspective is exemplified by what he calls the erotic equation: **ATTRACTION + OBSTACLES = SEXUAL EXCITEMENT.**

This equation illustrates the power of resistance, contradiction and the push-pull of opposing forces involved in sexuality and erotic experience. This can be seen as part of Reich's tension, charge, discharge, relaxation paradigm. Obstacles often intensify arousal, give a unique shape to each individual's erotic map, and can deepen »meaning and richness« in one's erotic experience. Some examples that illustrate this concept are two people that are attracted to each other but are geographically undesirable, of the wrong reli-

gion or race, etc. Obstacles that create or enhance arousal are often discovered through the exploration of one's first sexual feelings, early sexual fantasies, thoughts and experiences.

Before going on I invite the reader to take a few minutes to write about or imagine your most exciting sexual fantasy or peak sexual experiences. As you read on see what you notice about where your arousal pattern fits in the paradigm below.

Morin's research has identified what he calls the »four cornerstones of eroticism« which inhabit most individuals' erotic and fantasy lives. They include:

LONGING AND ANTICIPATION, VIOLATING PROHIBITIONS, SEARCHING FOR POWER, and OVERCOMING AMBIVALENCE.

Longing and Anticipation

Fantasy is necessary for longing to occur. Fantasy is the mental side of longing. We have to form an image of the person we desire and imagine or remember what it feels like to be with that person. Most can recall a time waiting for someone to return home with anticipation and feeling the intense longing to connect.

A childhood challenge of coping with parental neglect or abandonment may contribute to an erotic map centered on longing and anticipation (Morin 1995). The longing is always directed toward that which is in short supply. The individual chooses a variety of relational/erotic situations which »repeat« the developmental challenges of longing and anticipation including long distance romance, married/unavailable/traveling partners, and is aroused by teasing, romance and anticipation of impending consummation of longed for connection. These conditions flame the frustrating fires of emotional longing.

Relationships based on this are often stormy, passionate, even profoundly moving, but aren't sustainable long term because they are incompatible with longing. The paradox in longing and anticipation is that longing craves fulfillment but fulfillment dampens longing (Morin 1995). Predictable togetherness makes longing difficult to sustain in relationships. Times apart or even emotional distance can serve to rekindle the longing. In couples, this dynamic gets played out with fighting as a way of distancing and creating a felt sense of longing for connection. When I hear couples talk about having their peak sexual experiences after a fight I know that longing and anticipation is part of at least one of the partners' erotic map. There is the familiar expression

about how great »make-up« sex can be. Certainly a conjugal visit in a prison would stimulate this erotic equation.

As I explore a couple's sexual life and ask questions about each partner's sexual fantasies, I gain a better understanding of their erotic map as well as some of their core characterological wounds. Whether working with individuals or couples, the sense of relief expressed by clients when they understand this dynamic is palatable. They can see that is it not »personal« and there is a renewed sense of hope that this part of their sexual life can easily be addressed.

Violating Prohibitions

»Every society tries to limit sexual behavior. Not only do these cultural restrictions define and enforce the ideals and mores of the community, but they also have another function that is not consciously intended: they provide ready-made barriers that anyone can use to intensify his or her turn-ons« (Morin 1995, p. 83).

Children who are strongly discouraged from pursuing natural sexual curiosity as well as sexually repressive environments burdened with anti-sexual messages may contribute to core erotic themes of violating prohibitions. We all have the capacity for arousal and so what happens when the arousal meets up with the message that you are not to feel this way? This creates a paradox that to feel sexual I must break rules. This sexual rule breaking brings the risk of guilt and shame into the equation.

The individual chooses a variety of relationships/erotic situations which repeat the developmental challenges of autonomy/individuation to increase the »naughtiness factor« in situations with attraction to disapproved partners, inappropriate age, wrong religion, race, pushing the boundaries in fantasy, etc. and a general attraction to being »naughty« (Morin 1995). This arousal pattern thrives on a high risk of getting caught, such as having sex in an elevator, public place or involving oneself in illicit affairs.

One's religious or moral background may categorically distrust erotic impulses and adhere to a rigid code of conduct. This cornerstone is reportedly higher for Catholics, lesbians and gays. There is often a deep sense of shame in the naughtiness factor. Here fear and anxiety act as a turn-on (Morin 1995). In bioenergetics we are usually working to eliminate anxiety and in this dynamic it may be a primary component of one's erotic map. In two studies, men or women watched two videotapes with either an anxiety-in-

ducing scene or non-anxiety-inducing scene followed by a nude couple engaged in foreplay. Exposure to the anxiety-inducing scene produced greater arousal in both men and women than did the non-anxiety-inducing scene (Bem 1996).

I have seen this cornerstone present in clients with a masochistic organization as well as the narcissistic character structure. In the rigid structure the underlying wounding is about the right to be sexual and integrating the head, heart, and genitals in sexual play. The wounding with the rigid character structure fits with violating prohibitions as well. Again, these erotic cornerstones are not exclusive to a particular character structure. They can be present in a number of the character structures.

A male client of mine, presenting with a masochistic organization, clearly has violating prohibitions as a compelling part of his turn-on and includes the element of anxiety as an aphrodisiac. His most arousing and satisfying sexual encounters have been in public places such as his office, a golf course at night, or out in nature. The element of getting caught increases his arousal. He worked very hard growing up to be the good boy and gain his parents approval. His protest to his environmental oppression comes out in his erotic map through violating prohibitions. He can clearly talk about the anxiety as an aphrodisiac and also about how he manages that anxiety by a calculated risk of being caught. The sense of connectedness he feels with his wife is very important to him during sex but the arousing component of sex is the place where their encounters occur.

Searching for Power

Childhood experiences of powerlessness may contribute to the formation of an erotic map infused with themes of power and control. This is probably most obvious with clients who have a sexually traumatic background (Morin 1995). They may have been molested or raped and can find it quite disturbing to have rape fantasies, either as the victim or the perpetrator. By better understanding their erotic map and fantasies as a productive way to resolve childhood wounds, we can help our clients establish a sex-positive view and reduce their shame surrounding their sexuality (Bader 2002).

These themes may be subtle and in the background or more dramatic and center stage. They may be expressed in fantasies or behavior through dominance, submission, sadism, masochism and bondage. The power is generated by the interaction and neither actually has the power.

Here are some dynamics in the searching for power cornerstone:

- a) The forceful partner demonstrates with his/her passion the value and desirability of the one who submits.
- b) The submissive partner demonstrates through his/her surrender, the irresistible power of the aggressor.
- c) Submission allows the individual to avoid responsibility for sexual activity.
- d) Exploitation/manipulation dynamics need careful assessment when looking at the search for power dynamic (Morin 1995).

I have found the majority of my clients have some element of searching for power as part of their erotic map regardless of their character structure. This dynamic presents itself in a variety of scenarios directly linked to particular childhood wounding. Here the individual chooses a variety of relationships/erotic situations that repeat the developmental challenges of power and control.

Women are two times more likely to focus on power in fantasy than in real life encounters and 83% of lesbians report having this as part of their erotic map (Morin 1995). Violating prohibitions and search for power tend to be present during sex. Longing and anticipation and overcoming ambivalence are most dominant prior to sex.

Overcoming Ambivalence

We have all been emotionally wounded by those we counted on for nurturance and love. Love equals risk of emotional hurt but we continue to long for the human connection. The longing for love overcomes our fear of rejection or potential for painful emotions such as loss of a loved one. Desire overcoming fear creates a special kind of intensity. Sometimes it is the partner that creates the ambivalence and sometimes it is a type of sexual act itself, such as anal sex. This cornerstone is about being drawn toward and repulsed at the same time. The client may be ambivalent to passion or experience ambivalent attractions where they are magnetically drawn and repelled at the same time, liking and not liking a person, wanting and not wanting. Clients with this cornerstone may exhibit an ambivalence of loving and will have on again/off again romances.

»Both fiction and real life provide numerous examples of erotic attraction between two incompatible people who may not even like each other. Collectively, these observations suggest, that similarity may promote friendship, compatibility, and companionate love, but it is dissimilarity, that sparks erotic/romantic attraction and passionate love« (Bem 1996, p. 323).

How many times have we heard about a couple that is separated or even divorced, see each other, and end up in bed. Recently a male client, 25, was talking about his break up with his girlfriend and that when she came over to his apartment to pick up her belongings, they ended up having sex and lying in bed for hours. Overcoming ambivalence can be very arousing. However, it isn't the ambivalence that turns people on but »the transformation of mixed feelings into a single minded focus on pleasure« (Morin 1995, p. 103). Consequently, this cornerstone usually operates in the background and precedes sex.

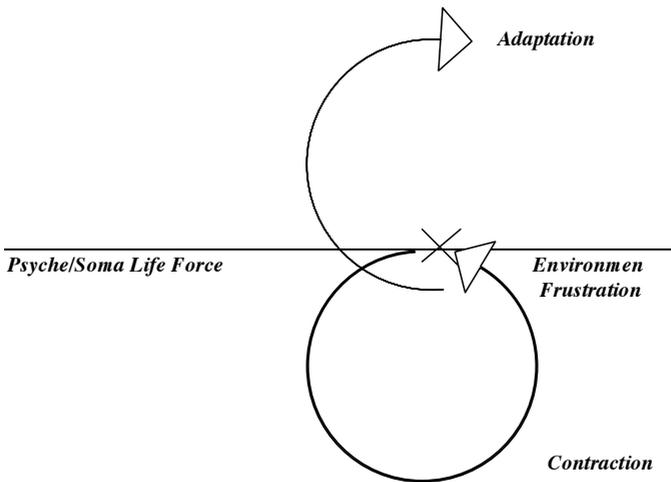
Overcoming ambivalence as an erotic theme can also be supported by the theory of opponent process where »strong affect is countered by internally generated positive affect (...) for example prolonged stress that activates the sympathetic nervous system can produce a parasympathetic rebound when it is suddenly withdrawn« (Bem 1996, p. 326). This could also account for the masochistic pleasure that is derived from initially painful stimulation.

Another client came to me because he was deeply in love with a woman and wanted to marry her. He was a recovering alcoholic who had had homosexual encounters while intoxicated. He identified as heterosexual both in attraction and life style however, he also knew he was very aroused with anal penetration. While working with him bioenergetically and taking a history, an important fact was revealed. His mother anally stimulated him with suppositories as an early infant and toddler because she didn't want to be bothered with dirty diapers. Even after toilet training she would make him sit on the toilet every morning before starting the day to make sure that he had his bowel movement. As we uncovered this it made perfect sense that anal stimulation was part of his arousal pattern due to this childhood wounding. By him understanding this piece of his erotic map, his shame was greatly reduced and he could see the need to overcome ambivalence as part of his erotic equation. He was able to talk to his fiancé about how to introduce anal stimulation into their sexual life and then he no longer feared he would act out this need in another arena.

Overcoming ambivalence, at first, seems to be a schizoid phenomenon but I have also seen this present in masochistic and rigid structures. Again, this cornerstone crosses over various character structures.

Body and the Mind

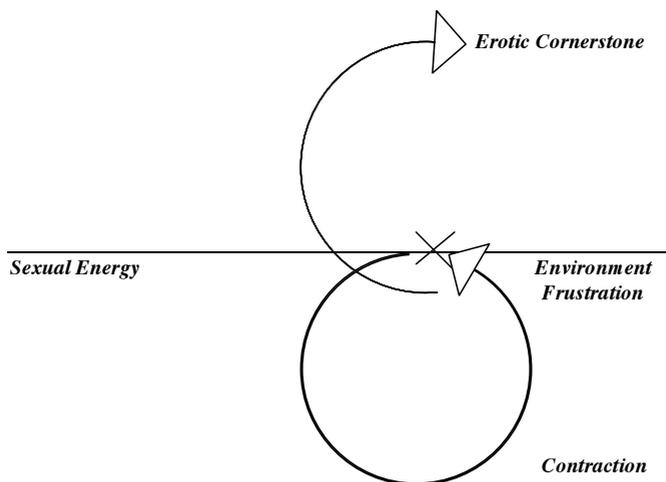
Many years ago I was introduced to Bob Hilton's adaptation of Reich's diagram as a way to understand the psych and soma of character structure. The diagram is a way to conceptualize the thwarted energetic movement, the environmental frustration, the belief systems developed out of the adaptation, and the resulting somatic consequences. Hilton (1997, p. 77) uses the diagram to illustrate that when the environment is too frustrating that the person begins to unconsciously contract. This contraction manifests itself both psychologically and physically in a unique accommodation. The upper arrow represents the psychological adjustment and the lower circle represents the bodily contractions. Each structure has its own specific diagram to representing these characteristics.



To further illustrate the correlation of childhood wounding on the sexual landscape of the body and the mind I have taken Hilton's diagram and adapted it to Jack Morin's four cornerstones. The psyche/soma life force could be seen as natural sexual energy that meets up with the familial, religious and cultural restrictions that define and enforce the ideals and mores of the community. This is represented by the two horizontal lines that meet at the two arrows. The upper portion of the diagram would represent the

wounding that becomes eroticized and fits into one of the four cornerstones, such as longing and anticipation becoming the core erotic theme for arousal.

The lower circle represents the contraction in the body as the defense against the external environment. »Behind the contraction lies the cauldron of feelings associated with the shame, pain, helplessness, and despair that accompany not being able to find a way of self-expression in the world« (Hilton 1997, p. 77). This could easily apply to one's sexual expression that moves »underground« and into one's fantasy life as a means of keeping the dangerous impulses in repression, the impulses that are unacceptable and/or threatening to the environment. My question is, are there specific or regional contractions associated with each of the erotic cornerstones? How is the sexual energy blocked or held in the pelvis?



Regarding this attempt at integrating this paradoxical model of sexuality with our understanding of characterological issues, again I ask the question: What does the organism require in order to experience »foreplay«, increasing arousal to build a charge and to then become free to organismic surrender? What are the wounds that resulted in defenses, both psychic and somatic, that blended with one's orgasmic sexuality?

Both traumatic and benign childhood and adolescent sexual and non-sexual experiences may be observed in the themes and landscapes of an adult's fan-

tasies and erotic map (Morin 1995; Bader 2002). Each person has his/her very personal characterological erotic map. The core need and the type of »no« one gets from one's environment determines one's characterological formation. This could also be said of Morin's four cornerstones. Do specific characterological traits correspond to specific erotic cornerstones? I ask whether and/or how do these erotic themes interweave with characterological issues.

A fundamental thesis of bioenergetics is that body and mind are functionally identical: that is, what goes on in the mind reflects what is happening in the body and vice versa (Lowen 1972). So how can these erotic cornerstones inform us about the meaning behind the various contractions held in the body? It seems to me that the mental activity of fantasy is the psychic counterpart to the somatic activity of the body as a pushing against the contraction and building a charge to increase the energetic streaming.

At this time I have more questions than answers and I invite you to begin to be more curious about your clients' arousal patterns and fantasies. As I stated earlier, Reich (1971) found working with arousal patterns and fantasy to be a useful component of understanding and working with his clients' internal sexual conflicts and wounding. Our clients' fantasy life may provide another window into their internal world as we help them move toward sexual health.

As presented earlier in this article each cornerstone seems be present in any of the character structures. These arousal patterns are stable over time and not easily modifiable (Bader 2002; Money 1999; Morin 1995). Once the erotic map needs have been met and the energetic blocks have been softened and melting and streaming sensations are present in the body, the person will be more available to organismically surrender to the pleasure of his/her sexuality (Lowen 1972)

Conclusion

When I presented my workshop on this topic at the IIBA conference in May of 2005, one woman commented during the process time that, at some time in her life, she had sexually acted out and had subsequently gone numb sexually for fear of acting out again. She said her sexuality felt dangerous to her and after her experience in my workshop she felt safe to begin to open up to her sexuality again because this model helped her create some boundaries that allowed her to explore her core erotic themes and she now had a framework

and boundary for her sexual turn-ons. She went on to say that she even thought of asking her partner to participate in this exploration as a way to open more fully to her sexual streaming. This sense of relief and reduction of shame is a frequent response from my clients and workshop participants when I introduce this model.

Morin's paradoxical model of eroticism links current compelling turn-ons with crucial challenges and difficulties from our past. Core erotic themes may be internal blueprints for arousal, which can transform old wounds into sources of excitation. None of these cornerstones are absolutely required for sexual arousal (Morin, 1995). A strong mutual attraction combined with vital sensuality can create a very satisfying turn-on. However, I think it is important to have an understanding of various erotic equations. I also think it is unrealistic to simplistically think that love is the only acceptable erotic equation. Foreplay and turn-ons take many forms and are a very individual dance. The function of arousal is to help build the charge, increase the tension and to become more available to surrender. As I continue to work on a body level and work through some of the energetic blocks, the core erotic theme may recede into the background and the person may not rely so heavily on it for arousal, however, it is still always there as long as any amount of the wounding is there, quietly or obviously.

We can help our clients to understand and utilize their erotic mind to achieve more satisfying sex and to become more conscious. We can help them see what they had to do to hold on to their sexuality. We can reduce shame, blame and provide hope. This model can also help couples through difficult times, as they understand their sexual dynamics including the differences in their arousal patterns.

Morin's paradoxical model provides another explanation to questions as to why individuals may seek out and repeat apparently defeating or destructive scenarios that are associated with past pain, trauma and discomfort. Why would an individual who experienced childhood humiliation and sexual trauma seek out adult sexual situations that repeat that experience? Why might someone who longs for a secure, stable, intimate relationship continue to be attracted to partners that clearly are unavailable? From a paradoxical perspective, core erotic and relationship patterns are viewed as healthy attempts to deal with life long dilemmas and as a search for wholeness and healing. This is the »organism« attempting to heal itself with insufficient information or awareness.

Bioenergetic theory embraces paradox. How often do we ask our clients to do that which they fear the most, that which seems utterly unreasonable?

We often encourage some expression that is the very thing the client is defending against and it is through this expression that healing occurs. We ask our clients to experience more aliveness on a body level when they may fear dissolution.

When Reich (1971) wrote about his work regarding orgasmic potency he was able to delineate ten specific stages and wrote about the absence of conscious fantasies during sex but he also stated that he did not take into account the »preliminaries which present no general regularity« (p. 79). That is the contribution of Jack Morin, he was able to provide the regularity of fantasy and arousal. His research and formulation has given me an additional meaningful framework, for my clients and myself, regarding a deeper understanding of the psychic and somatic functions of the human organism.

As we work with the body we must also, of course, work with the mind. Bioenergetic therapists see the individual as a psychosomatic unity (Lowen 1972). What affects the body affects the mind and what affects the mind affects the body. If we are working with the premise that there is a functional identity between psyche and soma then there is nothing going on in the mind that isn't, in some parallel way, going on in the body. At times, we may be able to identify more readily what is going on in one of these realms through these arousal patterns and fantasies. Hidden in this erotic mental fantasy is evidence of somatic activity that may currently be hidden in the somatic realm. Something may be going on somatically that is the juice for the mental fantasy or to put it another way, the hidden, repressed somatic activity may be the inspiration for the mental fantasy. If we give more room to the mental fantasy we may gain clarity about what is happening in the body as bioenergetic therapists. This is why I am excited about Morin's work and why Morin's model integrates well with the somatic work of bioenergetics. If we can stop judging the fantasy as wrong and embrace the fantasy, then the wounds will come out into the open. The soma will come out with more of its hidden agenda. We can then use this information as an additional road map to sexual health.

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