



## Robert Hilton

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Robert Hilton, Ph.D has been in private practice in Orange County, California for 45 years and has taught courses at the University of California at Irvine and San Diego, and the United States International University in La Jolla. In 1972 he co-founded the Southern California Institute for Bioenergetic Analysis where he continues to be a senior trainer. He is a member of the American Psychological Association, the California Association of Marriage and Family Counselors and the International Institute for Bioenergetic Analysis where as a senior faculty member emeritus he lectures at their International conferences as well as teaching throughout Europe, the United States and South America. In addition to his many publications he is the author of *Relational Somatic Psychotherapy: Collected Essays of Robert M. Hilton*, Michael Sieck, editor.

Serge Prengel, LMHC is the editor the *Relational Implicit* project (<http://relationalimplicit.com>).

For better or worse, this transcript retains the spontaneous, spoken-language quality of the podcast conversation.

*Serge Prengel: Hi Bob.*

Robert Hilton: Hi Serge.

*S P: So how did you get into this type of therapy?*

R H: Well I began my professional career as a minister. I was using Carl Rogers and his approach in my counseling but I found out that there was something missing, something about the body. I was struggling with the internal experiences of our body, our sexuality, our anger, and I couldn't find a place for this within the theological context that I was in or the counseling approach I was using. So I began seeking out a way to understand more about basic human nature and what the drives and needs are that we have. In a few years I began teaching in a theological seminary and getting my doctors degree in counseling, this was in 1961. In 1964, I went to a Gestalt workshop at Esalen Institute that was the beginning of the end or the end of the beginning. It was a time when the theme of the day was lose your mind and come to your senses... so with all of the contact and this therapeutic approach I touched during that week, a deep deep sadness in me... an overwhelming grief that I had never touched before. It was a very profound experience. But I found there, with the people who were there, that they welcomed this and were very open for physical contact and hugging and connection and I felt like somehow I had a new born again experience that was different from the religious one. So being part of this humanistic thread I came back to the seminary and introduced these newfound humanistic techniques of contact and relationship to the students and counseling curriculum. While the students were very happy with it, the faculty not so happy, but I also found out that within a few months that the "high" I had experienced at Esalen did not last and I dropped into a very deep depressive state... that depressive state led to some significant changes in my life... it meant the end of a marriage, the end of being a professor, the end of what I was doing in terms of the ministry. And I found myself afloat as it were, a drift, trying to integrate this profound experience I had in my body at Esalen, and the reality now of this depressive state.

Upon leaving my teaching post at the Seminary, I began a counseling career at the Institute of Therapeutic Psychology in Santa Ana, California. The director of this institute invited a person to come and talk about what he was doing in therapy and this man was Harold Streitfeld and he was doing what he called bioenergetic analysis. So we asked him if he could demonstrate this in the group that I was a part of... he looked around the room and saw me and said, "you look pretty depressed, let me start with you." And he said now stand up and put your fists in your back and assume a bow position and this will create vibrations in your body. And I said "ok." So I was doing that for a little bit, then he had me lie down on the floor, and keep my head still, but just move my eyes around the room... I did, and low and behold, out came this deep sadness again that had been buried inside. And I was overwhelmed by the crying... only this time, as I looked around the room, my colleagues had stood up from their chairs and came and formed a circle around me, looking at this phenomenon at me overwhelmed in this state of crying. They then represented to me parents that wouldn't pick me up when I was in a crib. So I realized that I was regressed very deeply but also present... but this time an immense rage came out, an anger that nobody was paying attention to me... I didn't know that I had any rage like that, or anger. So when this session was over, I realized that I had touched something very deep within myself... kind of inner voice that said "this is a core experience of your being." And I got up and came to this Harold Streitfeld, and said "I need more of this, I need help." And he said "well I'm just here on vacation, I'm not here to give therapy." "Well where can I find help?" So he said, "Alexander Lowen," was teaching bioenergetic analysis, and where was he teaching it? At Esalen. So I went back there in 1968 and began my journey in bioenergetics

*S P: That's a beautiful story and it illustrates amongst many other things how this was a personal integration something that... it's not, you know you didn't come to this from a sense of theory, but it's something where you experience in your body and in your emotions and you're approach to life, a very strong need, you found something and integrated that... you know found a way to integrate that experience. So it was a big question mark that was calling for questions that you went then to explore.*

R H: That's right, it wasn't the theory, it was a very visceral organismic experience so I knew it was true. It wasn't something I could make up or figure out in my head. It was very real. But I realized that it touched something that I was unable to integrate fully because after having that experience then I had all this anger, then I had depression and so then I went to find some way to integrate this into bioenergetic analysis and began the process there of understanding what it was I needed. The good news was that they knew in bioenergetics what that experience was about... they could read in my body the fear, they could read in my body the deep longing and sadness that I had... they realized the beginnings of how this happens in terms of neglect or lack of contact as a child. But they had a theory which said that all of this could be taken care of or released if I could release the tension around my early longings, allow myself to cry, allow myself to grieve the loss, that this then would bring me back to a unified self, a self that would be sexual and alive and present. And so they saw me as an organism, a worm that moved against certain blocks that produced inhibitions in my being... if we could reduce the blocks and allow the energy to flow through, I would be whole, I would have a self, I would be integrated. So that was the theory which is, "you are your body, and the body is the self," so if you open up the blocks that block you from experiencing your body you will have a self and you will be integrated.

*S P: and of course when you describe it this way, you imply what's missing, there is an isolation as opposed to the self existing in relationship.*

R H: there you go, that's exactly right serge. You're a good therapist, I can tell. So I followed that, and then what happened is my trainers, particularly Lowen was very contactful in his approach, that is he would recognize the initial loss that I had, he could put his fist against my jaws to open up a sucking reflex, he could put his fingers under my eyes and open up the terror that was connected with my early abandonment then he could provide himself as a person, he would say "you're afraid to touch me aren't you," and I would touch his face and he was very tender in those moments and would hold me and I remember I felt like the little duck in the children's story, "Are you my mommy?"...and it was a very deep organismic type of attachment. To this day I can feel the touch of his hands and the connection with him, and so what happened is I developed a very strong idealized transference with him but the good news was I was able to make that attachment, the bad news was the bioenergetic theory and experience didn't have a place for him to follow through with that attachment, that is the attachment was still seen as a repression of my oral anger. And he wasn't able to follow me through the stages of connection and individuation; he was always trying to preempt the contact by expressing the anger that was underneath the loving attachment.

*S P: Can we stay with this a little longer? You're saying to preempt the contact by expressing the anger associated with the attachment. I think that's an experience that a lot of people who have gone through some form of bioenergetics therapy have experienced and maybe we can stay with this a little longer to loosen that a bit.*

R H: Sure...

This was Lowen's experience with Reich. Reich began sessions by having his patients express their anger. He was very suspicious of any kind of positive transference. He felt that under the transference was an underlying resentment and so he would try to help you express that. But what's really happening is that there's not really transference, but the love for a person, the child's love of the connection and of the relationship to the therapist is often frustrated and not accepted and not allowed to develop properly because it isn't in the theory that the healing is in the relationship, the theory is that the healing is inside you, inside the release of the tension in the body, and that a great relationship as a potential affect regulation was not seen or valued at that time. Plus, the counter-transference issue of the therapist and their attachments were never studied, the counter-transference was seen as an inhibiting force, something that was keeping the truth of the relationship from coming into full flower, so the therapist wasn't a person who was being impacted by you as a client and expressing that impact. I had a client recently, several years ago, he was also a therapist, he told me, he said, "Bob, your job is to teach me how to love you and then to let me." The therapist's love really is a healing force. It starts off as an attachment, but then you need to walk through those stages of the anger and the fear and you provide a holding ground, like Winnicott and others have talked about, for this relationship and as you hold that ground, something happens inside the body of the client because he is not your child and you are separate but as he allows this love and connection to take place, other movements take place inside which then you as a therapist are open to receive and to respond to, the angers, the resentments, the fears, until he can tolerate living in his body of loving and being separate at the same time.

*S P: that's a very powerful way of adding what was missing... that observing the body and working on the body that you had described in a prior work... what's important is that it happens in a context of a relationship which is a recreating a loving relationship and it's about observing what happens, experientially, bodily, as this healing attachment takes place.*

R H: Exactly, that's exactly what I think. So if someone has this very powerful attachment, transference attachment, and I will say, "how do you experience that in your body, can you close your eyes and feel that in your chest or wherever you feel it, now can you allow that feeling of how important I am to you to begin to surface, can you let me see it in your eyes, can you let yourself feel it in my presence, and as they start to embody that feeling, as they begin to experience it, and look at me, then all the fear comes up about this kind of connection. And the sadness comes out of what they never had in their life, and the anger comes out because they could not take me home with them... and we bring them back to living the loving experience, embodying that loving experience that was so cut off as a child, when you embody the attachment and embody the transference, then you're not following an illusion but you're actually helping the person to live through a trauma or a death that happened that they could not live through before.

*S P: So a few minutes ago in describing your work with Al Lowen, you described how attached you became to him, and let's just for a moment imagine that Al had asked you, "What is it like for you at this moment? Do you feel in your body what's happening of your attachment with me?"*

R H: Well, it's interesting you brought that up because I read somewhere Serge, that in object relations, that the therapist should slightly idealize the patient, and by that they mean that the therapist communicates to the patient, "you have certain needs of me in terms of your healing process and I could be a useable object to use, I'd like to be able to provide the kind of contact you need in order to feel loving and connected... and somehow maybe I have missed that. Could you tell me how I might be more available to you?" Serge, you're starting the same rocking laughter right now that I had when I was like "oh my god, what would it have been like if one of my therapists or my trainers had said that to me... to have gone out of their own position and actually to have invited me. First of all I had started to laugh Serge, like you did, and then I had started to cry.

*S P: I feel tears in my eyes right now as you're talking about that.*

R H: Yeah, that's right. It's like "Oh my god." So what happened since they were unable to do that, because my parents weren't, and I am no longer blaming them or angry at them because of that... what happened is, like any child, and Freud talks about identification as a form of developing a sense of self, I became their student, I became their favorite student, I memorized the system, I became an advocate of the program, because it's a form of attachment, so when the real human connection is not available, than as any child you feel, okay, how can I be special with you? How can I get your attention? How can I be someone what you could be proud of? And so I became a very good boy, and a very good bioenergetic therapist. But what happened was after a few years of that, I went through another divorce, and another deep depressive state... some deep suicidal feelings and terrible anxiety and I realized that the deep core issue of connection and working through my anger had not been resolved and I needed something else. And what happened was that I found a woman therapist who did biodynamic work, and it wasn't just the massage and the stethoscope, I found I needed some kind of body therapy that I could get from the inside out, that wasn't coming from the outside in... my ego defenses were so strong and my rationalizations so powerful that I needed a particular kind of contact, so when I touched the depth of that pain in me again, that same overwhelming sadness, and the woman therapist connected to me, and moved toward me at that point, it was a different kind of connection and when I said to her later "would it make any difference to you if I didn't make it, if I didn't, you know, kill myself in some way." And she just looked at me and she didn't say a word, she just looked at me with such a look that I sensed how sad she felt that I had to ask that kind of question. I felt a deep pain in her but she didn't say

anything, but I could feel in my body, the deep caring connection that she had for me. And that meant everything. Lowen did all kinds of work with me, like opening my breathing and reaching, very powerful work. But I remember one comment that he made, one time, when I was sitting on the floor doing deep breathing, is, "Bob, this never should have happened to you." And that one comment I carry with me, it was a heartfelt connection, so I think at times, at times I could really feel his heart there, but due to his own personality and theory we didn't build on that, we didn't focus on our connection as an essential part of the healing process.

*S P: Yeah and so as you relate how that moment stays with you, there is a sense of how precious it was, and just in a way it becomes, you know, as we talked about before, what you're doing is integrating that experience, is a sense of putting into your practice, a sense of what has been really important to you and not just make it something that happens at random... a more systematic way to use it.*

R H: That's exactly right Serge, it's this relational connection that's important no matter what kind of therapy you're doing... sometimes you're doing therapy that involves shock trauma, and sometimes it's more developmental and in preparation for talking with you Serge, I listened to your interview with Peter Levine and I know Peter, and I didn't listen to all of it, but at one point he talks about having been hit by an automobile and he was thrown on the ground and he knew that he had to let the shock process take place inside himself... and a woman, pediatrician, who happened to be in the area, came over and said "Can I help you?" and so Peter says, while I'm lying there, having been thrown off the hood of a car, he said, "I need two things, I need you to touch me and I need you to talk to me." And he said, "with those two things, like a mother talking to a child, I was able then to pay attention to my body and to be in touch with what my body needed to do in terms of releasing the trauma through the shaking and the vibrations, so I needed a physical touch and the voice of this person, and so that's how a child does that." But I work with people, including myself, who didn't have that experience as a child, that soothing of the voice and the contact, so that having the voice and the contact could become traumas in themselves, and as resolving that lack of connection and the fear of allowing soothing to take place in order to pay attention to your body, so that you can release the trauma that's there, that's the aspect of the relationship not only for those who are able to utilize that but for those people like myself that could not utilize that soothing because the first time I contacted my therapist, my woman therapist, and looked at her and actually made our relationship real, I began to scream. I was terrified at moving out into the world and linking up with another person as a source of soothing... and so that's where I work with a lot of people around that and a great book on that is Kalsched's book, the Inner World of Trauma, and how the fear of linking up with another person to allow that kind of soothing to take place. Winnicott talks about babies who can tolerate, can keep the imago, the presence of the mother for X number of minutes and then it begins to fade, but if the mother comes in a good enough time, in Y number of minutes, then he's able to restore himself, but if the mother doesn't come in a good enough time, and stays away Z number of minutes, then the baby is traumatized and he says, this means that the majority of children do not carry around with them for life the knowledge and the experience of having been mad, these are babies who are left too long Madness here simply means a breakup of whatever may exist at a time of personal continuity of existence. He states that after recovery, "from XYZ deprivation, a baby has to start again, permanently deprived of the root which can provide continuity with a personal beginning." And I challenge that, that root I feel is the human heart, and the possibility to be touched and received and there's always an opening there. And when I interviewed Dan Siegel at our Bioenergetic Conference in October and asked him about that, he said, "well there may be those people who simply are unable to integrate that contact in their brain,

but we must always act as if that's possible." And so, my emphasis is that this is very much an integration of mind and body and our sense of self is very uniquely connected to the integration of that, but we need a relationship in order to do what Winnicott said, a child's task is to inhabit it's body, to help people live an inhabited life, and the recovery of that I think is in the heart. I think the heart expression comes through the eyes, the mouth, the arms, the arms are part of the heart, in reaching, in fact embryonically speaking, the arms develop out of the heart muscle... when you have heart attacks you feel it in your arms. So it's a very embodied experience. It's not just a theory, it's a powerful experience. That love also includes sexuality and one's whole being.

*S P: I find myself moved as I hear you say these last few words and there is something about it that is a summation of the experience and a summation of the quest... and in a way, as we started talking, you mentioned you started preoccupation with religion teaching administered, and then found body-oriented psychotherapy, but it seems at the same time as you were reading that quote and describing your position, there is also some profound statement about who we are and our place in our universe, and it's not just about therapy and in a way connecting to that sense of a larger sense of who we are, that's part of the healing.*

R H: Absolutely, when I touch this part in another person, Serge, I think as any therapist does, I feel a deep sense of spirituality, I feel like Moses and I should take off my shoes, I'm on holy ground here, it's really a body/soul connecting that is beyond our creation and beyond our egos and it has a resonance and it's such a rewarding experience, to be able to find that resonance. And I think that that's what we're looking for, a resonance that allows us to embody our hearts and love. And as we do that, we become part of the love of life.

*S P: And resonance is such a beautiful term because it's about resonating with someone else and it's about resonating which is a very physical experience, and of course emotional.*

R H: A client taught me this, She came to me was a bioenergetic therapist and said, "I would like to have therapy with you Bob, but I don't want you to use bioenergetics." And I said, "Oh." And she had been studying object relations, and she knew that she needed a particular experience of self, that bioenergetics wasn't providing, so I began reading a lot and offered her suggestions and so on and said, "Look, I don't know if I could do this, I read about it, but I'm not an object relations therapist or self psychologist." And she said, "I think you do bioenergetics from that perspective anyway and so let's give it a try." And so we did, but there was one particular day when she came in and was very depressed. And from a bioenergetics perspective, I knew what to do, to have her reach to me and make contact with me, to express the sadness or the anger. Any of these suggestions seem to her like her intrusive mother was trying to change her or make her be different in some way, so finally I said to her that it seems to me what you're asking me to do is to sit here and watch your drown and she said, "yes can you do that?" and I said, "I don't know, I don't know if I can do that." And so I put my head down for a moment and inside I said, "Bob, you've got to stay here with her now," but inside I realized that I was using my bioenergetic techniques to cover up my own feelings of inadequacy and feelings of fear of just being present and resonating with this other person, it was a protection for me, and I just had some quiet tears for a second, and I realized how little I valued myself as a healing agent, just as Bob. And so when I slowly lifted my head looked at her, she was smiling and her depressive expression was gone, and she reached out to make contact with me.

*S P: Because you had been so intensely present.*

R H: Exactly, Serge, and she said, “you gave me the greatest gift of all, I know how committed you are to bioenergetics, I know how important this is in your life, and you were willing to give that up at this moment, you know, to make a connection.” So this is where the healing comes, so I like the phrase, “techniques are what we use until the therapist shows up.”

*S P: So that feels like a beautiful place to end the conversation.*

 *This conversation was transcribed by Raina Patel.*

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