

MY ORIENTATION

Lucas Plumb, PhD



I believe that my clients are better served by knowing the orientation, theories, concepts, and principles on which I base my therapeutic approach. The theme that underlies my practice is the belief that we as a species are evolving towards more awareness and deeper capacities in our lives. Jean Houston, author of *Search for the Beloved*, has estimated that "each of us processes eight times as much emotionally significant material as our great-grandparents did."¹ Although we face critical personal and cultural challenges today, there is an undeniable movement toward democracy, emancipation, deep community, empathy, and psychological maturity at the global level.² It may look uneven or faltering at times, but many, many factors point to this conclusion.³ As we develop our capacities of self-reflection, collaboration, accountability, and deepen our understanding of the psychological process, we learn to unpack such feeling/emotional states as hate, envy, greed, and despair that get projected out onto 'other'--leading eventually at the international level to states of war and unbearable cruelty. [Note: during my writing, I will refer to feelings and emotions as a single category, depending on which term provides more clarity. This category is different from that of sensations, which are described more through the body, i.e. heart racing, stomach aching, throat tightening, etc.]

With all this personal and cultural change, comes the fascinating opportunity as well as responsibility to focus on how and why we do the things we do. More than ever before, we have a chance to develop the capacities necessary to enhance our deep participation with life and with the lives of others about whom we care. I believe our being is based on two central aspects, the Imagination--or objective psyche and our personal, subjective psyche--our Name. Translated from the Greek, "psyche" means Soul. The objective psyche is that part of us which "knows more"--that is greater than the more personal aspects of psyche. The more individual characteristics of psyche come from a combination of innate temperament, our genetic and epigenetic traits, our early childhood experiences, and the cultural environment.⁴ It also includes a component that remains mysterious and unknown to us as humans, and which I believe comes to us through the Imagination. Although Soulful Imagination is present in each of us, it was often not recognized or honored by those around us in our younger years.

We are usually unconscious to or unaware of much of this process and the material that accompanies it. We are also sometimes unable to see how our actions actually impact others. Therapy, especially in groups, can give us valuable information about ourselves that we seldom receive from others in our usual relationships. I will often do what I call "systems sessions" where my client brings in a significant other or family member with whom they want to do work that impacts them both. In this way patterns can be recognized and addressed so that each person can gain insight to new possibilities and opportunities to change.

My work is to help you reveal your thoughts, emotions, and sensations (remember, sensations are categorized differently from feelings/emotions) that allow me to reflect back, as clearly as

possible, what I see in you. I base my interpretations of what you bring to therapy on both my personal subjective experience as well as the larger, objective psyche. I see therapy not as "fixing" us, or as an endless struggle, but as an amazing opportunity to learn about ourselves and others and partake of the life we have been given. It is a means of understanding the important ways that Imagination dwells in us and moves us. Every day researchers and practitioners are becoming more aware of its critical importance in our lives.

This all points to the significance of learning to honor and respect the Imagination by paying attention to the images we are given, both at night--in the form of dreams and during the day, which "pop" into our mind unbidden. Images are often visual, but for our work they will also come in the form of words, thoughts, intuitions, meaningful songs, strong emotions, or body sensations such as chills, 'heart-aches,' smells, blushing, strange tastes, tight throats, stomach aches, or our neck hair standing on end. It is often helpful to tell stories about these 'images,' dialogue with them, write about them, or draw them so that they come alive for us. Art therapist, Pat Allen says: "I try to have the clearest intention possible to accept whatever comes to me. I trust that the images I need, the knowledge I need, exists within me, and that I can access it throughout this process."⁵ We can let all these kinds of images help us explore what we are sensing, feeling, or thinking--they can inform and enrich us.



The three categories that I have been speaking of--sensing, feeling, and thinking--are the basis of Paul MacLean's "triune brain" theory and this model can be very helpful in understanding the therapeutic process.⁶ Most of us are well acquainted with our thinking mind--the cortex, but less so with the emoting-limbic system and sensing-brainstem apparatus. The brainstem is a storehouse of both our earliest infant experiences as well as ancient patterns Carl Jung labeled "archetypes." In fact, during our very early embryonic, development we go through billions of years of evolutionary unfolding that include very primitive or "primal" emotions.



Our initial "memory tracks" or imprints are sensate (recorded in the brainstem) and usually we cannot "think" about them except through our body. Often our emotions and thoughts are based on these early sensations, but until we attune to them, most of us are unaware that they even exist. A great majority of us were birthed using a mechanized medical model; while it has saved many lives and definitely improved parts of the birthing process, it has often been insensitive to the essential need for a more effective attachment process between parents and newborns. The field of pre and perinatal psychology has recently emerged to study and address these critical phases of human development and the birth process.⁷

Reconnecting with the Imagination gives us access to reparation of early trauma lodged in the brainstem, and allows us to live more fully and creatively in the present. It encourages us to be

open to new possibilities. It supports us in learning about what is whole, essential, and alive in our beings. Part of my work as a therapist is to explore with you, your innately Imaginative Self--however that wants to find expression through you. That Self can move between pain and delight to craft a life that is meaningful and sustaining--both individually and for the culture in which we live.

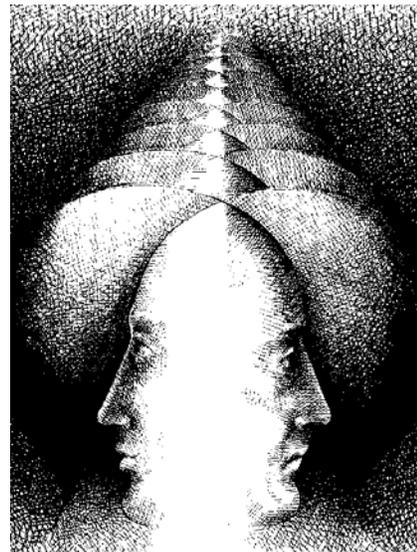


Because psychology is learning more and more about human beings, we are better able to honor the Imagination and do the critical job of raising children who can access it. But for those of us who had less attuned parenting or grew up in an environment that didn't support us in developing the capacity to become aware of our needs and desires--or our bodies, we must let go of old patterns and open to novel ones. This can be a challenging process! Often, our parents themselves had less than optimal circumstances and were dealing with their own deep pain. They simply couldn't raise their own offspring creatively.

As children, many parts of ourselves weren't allowed expression--especially those speaking the anger and hurt that we naturally felt. These things couldn't be revealed, so we had to suppress or even worse, deny those parts of ourselves. This is what is known in psychology as a "double bind."⁸ Now, those emotions or sensations can influence us in ways that we either don't realize or, try as we might, cannot control by cognitive or behavioral means. By accessing these emotions and sensations, which may seem very powerful at first, they become less controlling or overwhelming and can even be very helpful in informing us about how we want to live our life.

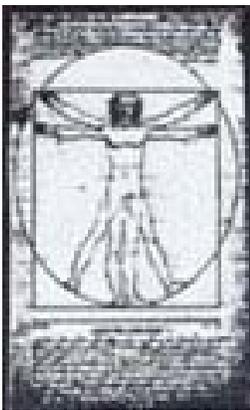
Going through this process means becoming aware of the pain that is usually caused by less than optimal childhoods, stifling educational systems, and an over-competitive culture. This can sometimes cause a certain amount of distress during therapy. Our initial pain has usually been well-hidden and defended against because it would have been overwhelming to experience it at a very young age. We all developed our particular self-care systems (defenses) because of this, but now they often 'over-protect' us and drain precious life energy from us.

One of our central defenses is to compartmentalize and even split off various parts of our whole self as necessary to be loved. Some of these parts are helpful and necessary--the leader (functioning ego), the child, the teacher, the celebrator, the wise one, the innocent, the fierce one, etc; but we often hide other parts that are more difficult to deal with--the critic, the brat, the dictator, the needy one, the rager, the sexy one. These hidden parts of us that are less acceptable in the culture are often called our shadow. While it is important to use discretion in how we bring these aspects into our outer lives, suppressing parts of ourselves can eventually lead to depression, defeat, and despair. It is often difficult to honor the valuable learnings that symptoms like depression can bring us, however, it is critical that we acknowledge the pain underneath them--the pain that our self-care systems are designed to defend us against. Our work is to bring this material to



consciousness little by little in a protected therapeutic container--a temenos. While it can be chaotic at times to dwell in such a place, keep in mind that this place is also the wellspring of creative and ecstatic living.

In exploring all of this--our pain as well as our joy--it is necessary to allow deeper and deeper levels of feeling, and sensing to emerge. To me this is the central task of therapy, and much of our time will be spent addressing it; the rest of the time will be interpreting and anchoring this material through a more cognitive process. It is critical to realize that joy and pain, hope and despair, love and hate--all spring from the same well, and if we block one end of the duality, we block the authentic expression of ALL the sensations, feelings/emotions and thoughts involved. Generally it is easier to get in touch with these emotions and our body sensations by working on a comfortable mat near the floor instead of sitting up on a couch and maintaining eye contact with the therapist. This is completely your choice and whatever you decide will be honored; doing therapy on a mat can be worked toward slowly and at your own pace. Work on the mat can also be stopped whenever you request. You are also welcome to bring whatever media will help you go deeper within during your sessions, whether it be music on CD, images from old photos or magazine clippings, written journals, letters, stuffed animals or a warm blanket, etc.



As mentioned above, we will additionally be working with the cognitive/thinking aspect of your personality and how it impacts behavior. The beauty of deep feeling work is that it can reframe the cognitive level of functioning in ways that merely talking about feelings cannot. All three levels of the brain, sensing (brainstem), emotional (limbic system) and thinking (cortex) can come into alignment when we access the depths of experience available to us. This has broad implications for foundational change, as anyone who has gone through this kind of therapy will confirm. Researchers are learning more about the neural nets that seem to underly the patterns in our lives and make change more difficult. New discoveries in quantum physics and cellular biology have changed many of the ways we think about the therapeutic path.⁹

Our goal during the therapy hour is to go deeply enough to reach this significant material, but also to allow you to function effectively enough during the rest of your week. This will require trust and a willingness to take certain risks. It will also call on you to develop as much awareness and clarity as possible about what you are sensing, feeling, and thinking. To balance the intensity of sensations and emotions, it can be helpful to develop "gathering practices" that assist you with self-soothing when material comes up that is painful or difficult to be with. There are many ways to do this--exercise, stretching--such as yoga, journaling, art-making, meditation, or body work, to name just a few. We will find ones that are best suited for your needs and temperament. It will also be helpful for you to let me know if you are having any unusual symptoms, and for you to take any prescribed medications or supplements that sustain your work.

I am mainly here to give you support during this, your unique journey to fullness, as well as to sometimes encourage you to explore pain you would understandably have difficulty navigating alone. I tend to practice in a more "relational" style--where the therapeutic relationship itself becomes a model for you to use in addressing other important parts of your life. This means that

I encourage you to share any conflict or negative feelings you might be experiencing with the therapy in general or with me specifically. I also make myself available by phone between sessions to reassure you during especially rocky episodes. Depending on my schedule, I may be able to do a second session during the mid-week so that we can take advantage of valuable but difficult material that is coming up for you.

During the time between sessions, I will sometimes encourage you to stay aware of certain patterns, or try novel approaches to situations, but if you prefer not to have any "homework," you can let me know, and I will respect that. Our one hour of therapy will also be greatly enhanced by other things you can do during the week, such as keeping a journal, looking at your dreams, doing various movement practices, singing, writing poetry, or letting the Imagination come through you by drawing or painting. Reading books about the therapeutic journey is also extremely helpful; this can expand our work significantly. I will gladly suggest books that would be appropriate for your work. And finally, it is very beneficial to take time out of your day to just sense, feel, or think about whatever is coming up for you and to honor your innate body wisdom. This includes honoring the important contribution of the thinking mind--logos, which a definite part of our bodies!



Just so this therapy adventure doesn't sound too daunting, I also think there is a place for humor and joy in this task we are addressing. While therapy is possibly the most complex and unconventional work most of us will ever do, it can have a lightness and even a downright funny side to it. Often my clients have times of deep laughter and hilarity in therapy (and hopefully outside of it too!). There are many things we can do to address the need for joy in our lives.

Finally, an important and seemingly contradictory part of this journey is to step back from our personal identities and pain in order to look at the larger story. It is a story of where humanity has been and the amazing places we can go if we will but trust our personal process and the greater Imagination. We are part of ancient patterns and there are many who have gone through these very same life dilemmas and despair before us; we call them our ancestors and they have developed ways through ritual and ceremony to traverse these difficult times. Not only can we learn from their stories and the myths that have been told about them, but we can also expand on the possibilities and capacities that we are developing through the therapy process. When we evolve, the culture evolves as well, so part of this work is always about our tending to the broader meaning of human flourishing as well as your very personal one.

I look forward to the possibilities that await our work and play in therapy. Much good fortune to you on your journey!



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NOTES:

- ¹ Cited in David Feinstein & Stanley Krippner, *The Mythic Path: Discovering the Guiding Stories of Your Past--Creating a Vision for Your Future*, New York: Tarcher, Putnum Books, 1997, 46.
- ² Ken Wilber, "The Neo-Perennial Philosophy," *The Quest*, Autumn, 1992, 16-21. In this encouraging article, Wilber writes about how civilization is becoming more evolved and adequate with each passing century. He believes that the "humanistic-scientific-rational stage, which, far from being anti-spiritual, is actually a necessary and intermediate form of Spirit-in-action." He uses as an example our romantic notions of Mesopotamia spirituality--"most of whose religious practices were, in fact, of the most barbaric variety imaginable."
- ³ Lloyd deMause, *The Emotional Life of Nations*, New York: Other Press, 2002, 218-23. DeMause says: "The rate of human violence has dropped from around a 75% chance of being murdered by your fellow human being to around 2 % for advanced democratic nations today, as a result of the slow and steady improvements in child rearing over the centuries." (P. 222-23)
- ⁴ The word epigenetic means "Originally from the Greek "epi" (on top of) and "genesis" (origin); the theory that the embryo is not preformed in the ovum or the sperm, but that it develops gradually by the successive formation of new parts. Any change in an organism that is due to outside influences rather than to genetically determined ones The life cycle theory adheres to the epigenetic principle in that each stage of development is characterized by crises or challenges that must be satisfactorily resolved if development is to proceed normally. John F. Abess, MD, Glossary; accessed 31 December 2002; available from <http://www.abess.com/glossary.html#E>.
- ⁵ Pat Allen, *Art is a Way of Knowing*, Boston: Shambala Publications, 1995.
- ⁶ Charles Hampton-Turner, *Maps of the Mind: Charts and Concepts of the Mind and its Labyrinths*, Map 21, New York: Collier Books, 80. See also: Paul D. MacLean, *The Triune Brain in Evolution: Role in Paleocerebral Functions*, Plenum Publishing, 1990.
- ⁷ I am a member of the Association of Pre & Perinatal Psychology and Health, and am deeply concerned about birthing practices as well as reparation for the trauma suffered by those who were born in hospitals within the last eighty years.
- ⁸ Gregory Bateson et al., *Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia: Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, New York: Ballantine, 1972, 2001-227. Bateson coined the term "double bind" and says that the first time we encounter this is when we challenge our mother feeling that our needs are not being met, and she says "it's for your own good" or she completely denies her negative emotions by saying "you know mommy loves you!" Richard Tarnas gives the following description of it:
 - ¹ The child's relationship to the mother is one of vital dependency, thereby making it critical for the child to assess communications from the mother accurately.

² The child receives contradictory or incompatible information from the mother at different levels, whereby, for example, her explicit verbal communication is fundamentally denied by the "metacommunication," the nonverbal context in which the explicit message is conveyed (thus the mother who says to her child with hostile eyes and a rigid body, "Darling you know I love you so much").* The two sets of signals cannot be understood as coherent.

³ The child is not given any opportunity to ask questions of the mother that would clarify the communication or resolve the contradiction. [The tyranny of silence.]

⁴ The child cannot leave the field, i.e., the relationship. In such circumstances, Bateson found, the child is forced to distort his or her perception [experience] of both outer and inner realities, with serious psychological consequences.

* I also feel it is important to note that this is the kind of double message is conveyed when parents say they love us, but then (due to their own inevitable psychological limitations to which they are often unaware or cultural constraints), must neglect our basic needs and wants.

⁹ Bruce Lipton, *The Biology of Belief: Unleashing the Power of Consciousness, Magic, and Miracles* (Santa Rosa CA: Elite Books, 2005). Lipton gives a fascinating view of why we are not just our genes and that there is much that we can change about our make up that was formerly thought impossible.