

Freedom and Flow

Finding freedom from restriction and removing the obstacles to healing.

By Brad Lichtenstein, ND

*Giving and receiving are at bottom one thing,
dependent upon whether one lives open or closed.
Living openly one becomes a medium, a transmitter;
living thus, as a river, one experiences life to the full,
flows along with the current of life,
and dies in order to live again as an ocean.*

Henry Miller

Charles was an outgoing, gregarious fellow who sported an eternal smile and infectious laugh. I had been working with him for three sessions before I learned he suffered from Guillain-Barre syndrome (GBS), an autoimmune disorder that affects the peripheral nervous system and can result in weakness, numbness, tingling and potentially paralysis and death. After watching me teach a group of 8th graders meditation at the private school where he worked, Charles called to schedule an appointment, not knowing exactly what he was seeking, or even what I did, yet he added, *anyone who can get those kids to sit quietly for 15 minutes is someone I want to work with.*

I tend to be fairly consistent with my opening questions to patients when initiating work together, and Charles was no exception:

- 1) What prompted you to call now, to make this appointment now?
- 2) What are your goals?
- 3) What do you hope to gain from our work? And...
- 4) How will you know when we have been successful, or our work is done?

Each of these four questions yield drastically different information that shapes the direction of our interaction. The first two, and possibly the third, tend to generate the traditional responses: I am depressed. I have anxiety. I have hypertension. I have Guillain-Barre (although this was not Charles' reply), followed by, and I hope to get treatment for (rid of) my depression/anxiety/hypertension/GBS. Since I view my work as a life-long process in growth, learning and development, I do not see my therapeutic relationships being terminated once "cure" happens. Nonetheless I ask the last question, since it provides richer soil in which to till. Charles, for instance, spoke of a desire to move freely through life. Ah, a direction in which to move versus something from which to run away. The 'running away approach' embraces pathology, concentrating on what is wrong. While vital information, it need not be the sole focus of the visit. The 'move towards approach' examines life vision and frequently outlines the steps to restore optimal balance.

I cannot tell you the number of times when I have asked the last question people either surprised themselves by a) realizing they have no image of living a peaceful life or b) recognized they already possess the answers they were

seeking outside of themselves. When an anxious patient tells me she will know our work is complete when she can find breath when images of traffic accidents pass through her mind, or when she observes her slide into negative self-talk yet chooses the opposite, she is writing her own treatment plan by describing the practices that are of benefit for her own healing and growth.

Charles and I began our work together by evaluating how he moved through all dimensions of his life (physical, emotional, mental, spiritual), where he encountered restriction, and where he found dynamic free-flowing movement. At the time of our first visit, a majority of his GBS symptoms had abated, with the exception of some upper extremity weakness and the inability to fully flex his fingers due to swelling and stiffness. Early on this was never mentioned (nor did I ask). Only after the third session of exploring how to breathe, stand, sit and walk with fluidity did Charles share his GBS diagnosis, although it did little to change the path we were on. We continued to play with moving energy like liquid whether it be movements of his body, flow of emotions, dance of relationships, or exchange of ideas and communication. The objective was always the same – finding freedom from restriction, then choosing how to live that moment in flow.

From a naturopathic/homeopathic perspective, this reflects the most fundamental level of care, or the first tier in the therapeutic order – removing obstacles to cure and cultivating the conditions for healing. Restriction is the obstacle to cure and flow is the condition for healing. Identifying the postures, thoughts, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors that impede the life force and those that assist it is the first step in care. Charles was learning how to assess any given situation for its life-affirming benefits, rather than needing to rely on medical experts, studies or research to tell him what is good or bad for him. Learning for himself, about himself, is empowering, and Charles becomes the expert healer of his own life. I merely set the stage, provide the mirror, and allow the process to unfold.

Four months later, Rebecca showed up in my office, saying *Charles said I should see you, but he couldn't explain what you do. Anyway, here I am.* Unlike Charles, Rebecca voiced her complaint clearly and emphatically at the onset. A professional woman in her mid-thirties, she was suffering from debilitating arthritis. She had seen the "best" doctors in town and was here as a last resort. About three and a half

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years ago, her left middle finger became swollen to point she was unable to fully bend it. To the best of her recollection, nothing precipitated this – no injury, trauma, event or even psychological issue. Her doctors ran blood tests, x-rays and MRIs, all revealing nothing. As Rebecca recounts, her doctor felt compelled to “do” something, so he suggested a series of cortisone injections, which relieved swelling slightly for only 48 hours.

Over the next three months, things got worse. The toes on her left foot began swelling, and within a month the entire bottom of the left foot was inflamed and painful. Rebecca next sought help from a podiatrist who told her she had a depressed metatarsal and fitted her for orthotics, which also failed to relieve her symptoms. After wearing these for a month or so, the same pattern developed on her right foot, again all without incident or explanation. Not knowing what to do, she returned to her first rheumatologist, who prescribed Vioxx. On follow-up, he noticed white spots on her nails, and speculated that she might be suffering with psoriatic arthritis, for which he prescribed a two-week course of prednisone. Two months later and Rebecca is listing for me her current medications that now include Vioxx, sulfathiazole, methotrexate, folic acid, and Indocin. The only notable improvement comes from Indocin, which occasionally relieves pain, and at best inconsistently. When I examined her feet, I was surprised she was even walking. The calm, matter-of-fact, almost detached manner of relaying her story belies someone with this degree of inflammation. Her feet were so swollen, red and hot that normal landmarks, including joint lines, were barely discernible.

Rebecca and I talked for over an hour and a half, searching for potential triggers, factors, stressors, traumas, etc. I probed diligently for prior emotional suppression perhaps simmering below the surface, but nothing emerged. Homeopathically, I struggled to grasp any clear pattern. I had to keep in mind that from the very beginning, Rebecca’s answers to all my initial questions centered upon the physical – her goals were clear: no inflammation, no pain, no limitations; all activities like walking the dog and riding horses resumed.

Rebecca craved freedom and fluidity in life, as well. With Charles, we focused on the intention of moving throughout his life and interactions fluidly, which included the psychoemotional/spiritual dimensions, yet little hands-on energy work. It wasn’t that Rebecca lacked a desire to confront thoughts and feeling, rather at this point in time, her toes and feet needed direct attention – they were demanding to be heard. Therefore, I invited Rebecca to lay on the massage table so I could ‘listen’ to what her toes and feet had to say. I invited my hands to act as a conduit for liquid movement, flowing in the direction of ease and comfort rather than forcing her energy to conform to some preset guidelines or ideas that I believe important. Silently asking her body/mind/heart/soul for permission to share in this experience, my hands came to rest on one of her right toes, the most painful one. Over the next fifteen minutes, I gently and almost imperceptibly followed the movements of energy in her toe. With eyes open the entire session as she stared up at the ceiling, Rebecca provided me play-by-play report of experience. *Energy is streaming up both my legs. It feels as if you are squeezing my toe. I’m getting the sensation like an acupuncture needle going through the sole of my foot. I see colors, yellows turn-*

ing to blues, streaming up my leg.

Then it happened. Engrossed in the flow, I felt a perceptible “clunk” and we both heard a loud “pop.” We both gasped and Rebecca sat up on her elbows as I immediately dropped her toe and backed away from her feet. Gazing back and forth between her toe and me, she smiled and said, *Do you see that! The swelling is gone! It is all gone!* And it was. The toe which had been fat, hot and red now was thin, cool, and pale.

For Rebecca, the theme was the same as for Charles – moving freely with ease. I longed for her to practice unwinding the blocked energy in her toes and feet without my assistance, so I taught her liquid, non-linear movement. This involved quieting her mind, listening to the tissues, bones and spaces for guidance, and slowly and meditatively moving as if she were seaweed at the bottom of the ocean. Patterned, habituated movement was to be avoided. Having just experienced the ‘dance’ I had with her toes, she developed her own choreography replicating the sensation of flow, but this time from the inside out.

In case you are wondering, before our session ended, I suggested a homeopathic remedy, informed her about food allergies (coffee, sugar, wheat and dairy were staples at almost each of her meals), discussed herbal anti-inflammatories, and talked about the healing properties of water. At our next session one week later, Rebecca reported having more energy and feeling better with the nutritional changes, yet failed to notice any other reduction of inflammation or pain. The toe that healed during our last session remained in remission.

From that point on, each session began and ended with Rebecca on the table. We chatted throughout the session, and I learned more about her story, family history, always seeking to uncover some deep, dark kernel of turmoil; but alas, none came. Six sessions later, the inflammation had completely resolved. Only one or two dramatic pops, otherwise the remainder of releases were subtle as the fluid, heat and color simply drained from each area one by one. Never working on her finger, that too began to improve as well.

When I was a student at Bastyr, each of us had to learn to facilitate a Wellness Consult. Unlike the traditional counseling session where we focus on the patient’s chief complaint, here we focused on what was going right in the person’s life. I was amazed how easy it was for both patient and practitioner to drift back to pathology. We feel comfortable here. My approach to Charles and Rebecca was a Wellness Consult of sorts. I was searching for freedom, flow and ease, and encouraged and facilitated practice moving in that direction.

Do you know what ease looks like? Where does flow show up in your life? What inhibits the fluidity of your vital force, which is evidenced through symptoms? Are you ready to move towards comfort? How will you know when your work with restriction is done? What will that look like?



Calling Seattle, WA his home, Brad S. Lichtenstein, ND spends his time practicing as a naturopath, yoga and meditation therapist, and core faculty at Bastyr University in the Counseling and Health Psychology Department. His approach to care emphasizes the cultivation of mindfulness and embodiment of the present without judgement. Brad continues to facilitate yoga classes and his PranaPlay workshops exploring the dynamic and conscious play of energy as it manifests in body, breath, thought, intention and action (www.pranaplay.com).