

Robert Bornt

# Self – No/Self

Robert K. Bornt, MFT

**Editor's Note:** Robert Bornt's article here is condensed from a book he has in development titled *Let go of my ear*. He employs the wisdom of Huna philosophy and developments in neuroscience to emphasize Hakomi principles of the self-in-relation. Individualistic approaches to psychotherapy are noted for their lack of efficacy. The power of relationships, attachments, and the cultural self outside the therapy hour are emphasized for their efficiency in supporting well being within a more systemic unified self state.

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**ABSTRACT:** "Self/No-Self" is a condensed introduction to a model of how recent findings in neuroscience support relational, system oriented therapeutic models of healing; especially The Hakomi Method of Psychotherapy and its adaptation to working in what might be referred to as the extra-therapeutic field with The Triage Method developed by the author. The article begins to explore how these methods can expand their efficacy in supporting the wellbeing of clients by utilizing the neuroprocesses defined as "instinctual mechanisms" of emotional development, the innate expression of systematic emotional states known as temperament, the emotional strategies of character, and the phenomenon of mirror neurons influence on neural radiance between developing selves and self consciousness.

## Monty's Sanity

I recently met with Monty, a Canadian that had served in the U.S. Army during the Vietnam War. It seems, Monty had been a little defiant after coming home from two in-country tours and found himself detained in an Illinois jail, anxiously waiting trial and facing a possible 15-year sentence. His defiant attitude apparently created a wave of tension, causing his in-house handlers to assign the longhaired troublemaker a few days of sense deprivation.

Monty was thrown into a special cell in the SHU (solitary housing unit) especially designed to provide a sightless, soundless experience. After a few weeks or days, he wasn't completely sure which, he found himself asking, "Am I going insane here? Am I already insane? Do "I" even exist?" After he had told me much of the story, he looked at me with an awkward smile and concluded that at the time, pondering the question just deepened his concern. We both laughed at the insanity of the situation he described.

We could afford to laugh because we were sitting safely around a campfire in the hill country of Texas, well grounded in the present, observing the incongruent experience of his past. Sitting across from me, looking at me through a soft evening drizzle, Monty had the opportunity to make sense of and even find humor in his past experience. In an unfortunate way, Monty had experienced an inversion of insanity's process, where a developing state of mind prevents normal perception, behavior, and social interaction. In Monty's case the

prevention of access to normal perceptions, behavior and social interaction had created his uncertain state of mind. Perhaps that was exactly what his captors had hoped for. Surely they were not intending to correct Monty with an "environmentally created" emotional enlightenment.

## Witnessing His Mind

The more Monty was deprived of external stimuli the clearer he could – as he put it, "notice my mind". He described the experience as noticing and studying his mental processes from another "place" in his mind. When I mentioned the word witnessing, he seemed relieved to have a descriptive word, saying, "That's it exactly. I was witnessing my mind struggle to make sense of the moment." He wasn't referring to making sense of why he was in jail. He was describing a struggle to make sense of core information essential to a rational existence.

Monty explained that as he examined the question, "Am I insane here?" he witnessed his mind searching for something to define who he was, something to indicate normal perceptions. He said pushups were often the only thing that kept him from floating down a weightless, lightless abyss. As it turns out, pushups were used for more than experiencing his body's physical existence; he unknowingly used them to define his mental existence – his sense of self, as well.

The process involved reflective imagination. With every pushup he said he became more confident and focused,

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more emotionally defined as a resilient, sane, intellectual powerhouse, using anger and a quest for justice as the motivation to “keep his stuff together”.

The next morning, as the heat began to encourage incredible humidity, Monty and I were out in the rock hard driveway digging a little trench, dripping with sweat. The trench was to relieve rainwater pooled up in the rose garden before millions of twitching, crescent shaped larvae became little flying Texas vectors. As we worked our conversation returned to Monty’s solitary experience. Something about sharing the physical effort of digging through rock during a central Texas summer reminded Monty of pushups and sanity. Figuring all expressions are motivated for a reason, I asked him if he wanted to explore the experience more deeply. He looked up, stopped digging and leaned on his shovel. That seemed like a good indicator of his interest, so I began asking him about how he had maintained sanity by doing pushups.

Initially, he described how the more his strength surged the more he began to imagine confronting his captors and the judge making him feel powerful and in control, but he quickly countered by admitting how fast the sense of control vanished in the silent darkness of his cell; yet he kept his sanity. There was something else he was doing to keep his wits.

### **Getting Curious**

We both got curious and went through his experience again, step by step, slowing down to connect the dots; the pushups pumped him up, increased physical sensations, causing his attention to focus on his body; where he noticed his wrists connected to his shoulders, connected to an image of facing the guards, to the feelings while he faced the guards, to the feelings he felt from the guards. They weren’t actually aggressive feelings!

Slowly, he began to notice he had imagined more than revengeful confrontation. Beyond the urge to destroy, he had imagined interactions where his guards stood down and respected his space and the judge had agreed with his political purpose - letting him go. We talked about how the guards and judge had actually reflected feelings confirming his sense of “who he *really* was” – a strong and just person. After a long pause, actually an interruption from a rabid raccoon that stumbled out of the forest had a seizure and died in the puddle near our feet, Monty said, “You know this sounds insane, but it was like I had no real sense of myself until I had confirmation from those interactions. I knew I was a real person with value, I wasn’t really angry or hateful, but in the darkness! That’s why I thought I was going insane. I became less and less sure of anything.”

In the end, the judge didn’t agree with Monty’s political convictions but must have admired something about “who he was”. Rather than sentence him to further confinement

the judge admonished him to return and remain in Canada. Monty was on a bus home that night, quietly enlightened with valuable tools for maintaining his sanity.

### **Defining “Who we are.”**

Monty’s struggle with sanity reveals important processes in the creation of an efficient foundation for achieving and maintaining healthy emotional function, especially under adverse conditions. Emotional function defines “who we are”, organizes our sense of our self and is a valuable part of our consciousness. The ability to witness one’s own emotional processes, from another “place” in mind, and track the organization of one’s sense of self, is an essential skill for developing purposeful and efficient emotional functioning.

Monty hadn’t done both in jail. He had witnessed his mind struggling and found refuge in emotions – anger and a call for justice, which helped him survive moments but may have been adding to his struggle. By focusing his awareness on each step in the process with me he was able to discover information about how he actually, unconsciously, organized a congruent sense of self – one that made sense to him. Learning to track his own process of utilizing reflective feelings (emotional signals from others) to collaborate his historic experience of self seemed to be a valuable new tool for Monty. It also illuminates new understanding of how the self becomes known.

### **The Drive to Know**

The drive to understand “who we are” is a vital aspect of many cultures and appears to be an element of emotional stability connected to survival. The physical body is genetically designed to survive within a certain, limited range of emotional states. When there is uncertainty, survival systems are activated, energy use accelerates, and emotional suffering is limit’s alarm. If we know who we are, references are available to give meaning to the pieces of life’s experiential puzzle and we efficiently maintain a secure sense of self. Thus, figuring out “who we are” is the conscious experience of an instinctual drive designed to maintain emotional stability and secure survival (Damasio, 1999).

All the figuring takes energy and time and unless it is efficient could be a stressor in itself – pushing survival systems closer to their limits. In homogeneous cultures (cultures of like members) individual selves seem to be woven into family and community, collectively experienced without an apparent drive to individuate, to know one’s self. The experience of living life, as part of a known fabric, provides emotional stability and creates a secure, functional base well within survival limits. It may be that individuals in these situations are missing the wonderful experience of having known their self, but they may also be rejoicing in a life of non-self, without struggle; honoring the potential of a

natural process of co-creation where emotional energy (mind) of the group influences the development of individual consciousness – the known fabric.

### **Early Healers**

The earliest purveyors of psychic healing were Shamans. In preparation for treatment the Shaman still uses psychedelics, rhythm dancing and fasting to enter an altered state of mind where intuitive knowledge of the patient's struggle is revealed. Treatment is both physical and psychological and often includes reparation of fractured social relationships – indicating that they too respect the potential of social (other minds) influence on healing. In these cultures there is great respect for the healer's capacity and intrinsic reliance on social unity. There is hierarchy – top down influence, but it seems to be a hierarchy of capacity, with purpose of guiding another's healing through unification with many realms of reality – a process of confirming and supporting who one is.

Ancient Polynesian Huna philosophy addresses suffering as an expression of imbalance, between levels of one's self and between the many earthly realms of reality. Huna understanding of emotional processes conclude that a low self represents the psychic realm of instinctual biological processes, a mid self represents the psychic realm of learned processes of the aware mind or brain, and a high Self affirms spiritual qualities and universal unity. Huna treatment is a process of merging psychic energy where guides and spirits transcend self-states to encourage the reunion and collaboration between one's inner selves and between the various realms of shared reality. There is respect for unity of minds and the existence of a non/self state in Huna tradition (Long, 1958).

Eastern strategies of understanding self have persisted throughout time, recognizing a drive for salvation as a motive for awakening one's "true self" – the spiritual self within universal oneness. Eastern traditions of healing transcend deep into recognized levels of mind. Utilizing meditation and Yoga techniques, enlightenment of one's self comes about through recognition and correction of thoughts, the search for meaning and the need to cope with suffering. During states of mindfulness the highest levels of sensitivity transcend emotional process and expand in spiritual realms of unity. Enlightenment is healing.

### **Modern Healers**

Western psychological culture has developed concepts of what and who a self is, relying heavily on biological science, physics and evolution – or denial of evolution; where understanding comes from separation, reduction, and the assumptions of causation. (Monty's strength caused the guards to stand down and the judge to let him go).

Mostly, western concepts amount to complex developmental systems where it is assumed that one's sense of suffering

develops out of conflict between parts within one's self, where unresolved experiences define and direct emotional expression. Western language defines self as a person's essential, individual and unique being. Synonymically, self is one's ego, I, oneself, persona, person, identity, character, personality, psyche, soul, spirit, mind, or inner being that is distinguishable from others.

In general, western psychology compartmentalizes self into unconscious (non-conscious), conscious and spiritual operating systems, seeking to support what is considered an instinctual (organic) drive to individualize one's self and thus know and have control over one's "whole self". The assumption is that due to enmeshment -- entanglement with the wants and needs of other "selves", -- one's personal drives are thwarted motivating inner conflict and erroneous thoughts, which are believed to fester into mistaken energy absorbing assumptions.

Treatment amounts to digging deeper into the layers of one's self, finding what is conflictual and taking control over it -- mastering it, with the help of a trained analyst or therapist who can make sense of it all for you. Generally, there is hierarchy of individual selves and their capacity to heal and be healed.

### **Fractured Culture**

After Europe was shaken and rattled by its second major war, the displaced intellectuals of central Europe involved in therapy of the psyche or mind, began to have major impact on western thinking. "Who we are" transformed into a unique, independent self struggling against the pressures of its environment, striving to be independent, like the physical body. Sigmund Freud took an early lead by introducing a new concept, Psychoanalysis. His theories evolved from existing psychotherapy and biology. He structured the self into the id, ego, and superego, focusing on analyzing the drives, internal conflicts, and fantasies, which he believed were influencing the organization of the self from within.

Heinz Kohut, become a psychoanalyst following Freud's lead. However, he noticed the self as separate but co-existing with the ego. Kohut conceptualized the self as a tripartite (three part) self with "self states," which develop as their needs of self-worth are met through relationships with others. He described this process as "self-object transferences of mirroring and idealization", strategies of utilizing others as external objects to meet the needs of one's self.

Like Freud, Kohut believed healing psychic stress occurred when current relationships (objects) provided what had been missed in earlier relationships. According to his theory, a person would attempt to eliminate feelings of low self-esteem, experienced in the schoolyard, in a developing romance or even in a therapist office, by boasting to others. The child or client would be seeking a reflected or mirrored

enhancement of their self-worth in an attempt to make sense of or define who they are -- or who they hope to be -- if they could replace what had been missed. He also placed emphases on the potential of one's identification with others (Kohut, 2000).

### **Top Down Control of Self**

Modern strategies of psychological treatment often involve analysis and interpretation of psychic (other than physical) pain and emotional limitations as a means of revealing correlations between the pain and its causation -- usually external relationships and events. Focus is often turned to environmental enmeshments (entanglements) -- usually family and cultural influences deemed to be controlling or directing *who* the client is, nullifying their "true self." Importance is placed on the training and intelligence of the therapist who can direct and advise others on how to change and become "*Who they truly are*".

Strategies and theories based on this premise have not proven all that efficient in resolving unhealthy emotional function -- reducing suffering. Kohut's expansion of his theory in the 1970s and 1980s, to address the empty, fragile and fragmented "selves" he believed came from aggressive overindulgence and greed hasn't slowed societies pace. The inefficiency may be motivating current writers and educators to suggest that it takes an eclectic tool bag of techniques to be successful, but molding techniques to meet each client violates the principal need of efficiency in survival. It takes energy to separate, to analyze and to conform. It takes energy to sort cause and effect, and then even more to manage all the pieces -- to maintain accuracy in what they mean.

This is definitely top down management where top -- the therapist's sense of self as the one knowing assumes it knows what is best for the parts -- those seeking. Without exploring more with Monty it may have been logical to suggest that doing pushups caused his mental and physical strength to develop and survive, even to the point they influenced his situation. This would have supported Monty initial thinking. It would have also supported what was incongruent in his sense of self. His "question of sanity" developed out of conflicts between his historical self -- a peaceful, self-reliant and compassionate veterinarian, and his persecutory experience.

### **Nature's Resolve**

Nature, on the other hand, appears to use a different, very efficient collective management strategy that may reflect greater possibilities for our own process of healing. In the phenomenon called "swarming" all the parts (fish) of the whole (school) are communicating and making decisions aligned with what is best for the whole. Research is showing intelligence, beyond genetically programmed instinct, guides swarming.

In swarming each participant monitors and reacts to its immediate environment, which includes its nearest neighbor, based on simple sets of rules. What may start as a survival instinct (to capture food) motivates the first action. Others, responding to the first action, make decisions about what is the most efficient and best next move. As decisions are made the swarm develops. For swarming creatures it is the most efficient means of capturing food or finding a new nest -- for the individual and thus the whole.

Research is not suggesting the thought is, "Hey, I can do better if I join the group and swarm around food", but rather the swarm develops out of a multitude of minute decisions, often influenced by mirroring. One guy goes for food, the neighbor goes too -- perhaps knowing it is safer in numbers and two are more efficient than one. As they initiate the chase, localized decisions are made by neighbors (parts) about turning and chasing, each decision influencing another as it radiates outward. The swarm is formed and lasts until it is no longer efficient. Independent action is influenced by the whole. No one is directing traffic (Miller, 2007).

### **Tearing from Freud**

The inefficient, top down management style of modern therapeutic healing theories may be why theories continue to evolve out of theories, with each new paradigm seeking a greater level of efficiency in order to survive. In addition to Kohut, at least two members of Freud's Wednesday (night) Psychological Society were independent self-thinkers who also evolved away from Freud. Alfred Alder and Carl Jung, both rejected Freud's authoritarian rule and ever-changing personality theory. They may have left because they couldn't tolerate the inefficiencies created by Freud's intellectual drive or perhaps they weren't able to participate in the management of ideas and moved on. In either case, they both professed to find their own system to define and cure emotional suffering.

It is worth noting that the inner emotional lives of these early theorist's seem striking similar to their theoretical methods. The modern history of psychotherapy is full of clashes between these proprietary "selves" and their struggle for superiority, reflecting functional truth in Kohut's theory -- that people seek to have emotional experience they missed in youth (Corsini, 2000). Freud promoted the analysis of another's psyche (self), through dissecting conflicts between instinctual drives and social demands, as a means of individuating and healing. Freud's personal life history suggests his professional efforts were driven by a need to interpret and resolve disturbing conflicts similar to those within his own inner life. Jung sought understanding and resolve for others through defining mystical and creative "internalized" aspects of one's self, a reflection of his own self-described introversion and spiritual journey.

## **Post-Modern Healers**

Recently, Post Modern theories have emerged to heal psychic pain by strengthening one's self through client-centered methods, seeking answers to heal suffering from within the client. It is a popular trend towards achieving happy and productive relationships through the individualization of one's self and even finding one's higher Self through self-discovery, self-empowerment and re-authoring self-narratives. The effort is to support development of a "whole self" and its ability to control its own emotions and behavior, beyond enmeshments, to be self-empowered and self-directed.

Carl Rogers was instrumental in establishing the foundation for this extremely efficient strategy of including the client in managing what is best. However, Rogers' introjection of compassionate "Unconditional Positive Regard" into his theory of Client-Centered Self-creation seems to also be a direct reflection of his sensitive, Christian influenced personality. Keep the peace -- don't hurt anyone, don't bully him or her! On the surface this strategy appears to be an awesome addition to humanities preservation, but is it organically efficient in supporting the development of another's healthy emotional function? Or does it support a belief about how others should treat each other?

Again, neither movement, directing another's self on how to heal or empowering another's self to heal from within, are efficient or effective. Recent research finds that 87 percent of client emotional healing can be accounted for by extra-therapeutic factors -- life unfolding outside of therapeutic influence (Wampold, 2001). Antidotal stories are moving and convincing, they make us all feel good in the moment, but why then are more and more people finding their "selves" lonely, isolated and silently suffering. Why are we continuing to experience insane multi-cultural conflicts? And why is Western culture stuffing it's self with rabid consumption. These behaviors are simply not efficient, and as such cannot promote survival. What's missing?

## **Perpetuating the Suffering**

Collectively, popular strategies to end suffering by individuating the self, no matter how effective they appear on the surface, may actually be perpetuating a deeper suffering -- out of our awareness. Promoting one's self as a unique, personal mental structure entitled to difference and separation, like one's physical body, may exacerbate anxiety -- if it is indeed not separate and unique. We can't really know because emotional pain is expressed as affect. It is not actual physical pain. It is usually noticed as a subtle feeling of discomfort, easily labeled anxiety, stress or depression, and easily sedated by socially accepted, subtle (or not so subtle) behaviors. Drinking, drugging, sexing, shopping, denying and killing are excellent examples of sedation strategies -- just like Monty's use of anger and justice momentarily sedated his anxiety of going insane.

Contrary to western definition, selves cannot be individuated like the physical body. To exist, the formation of a self requires bilateral and bidirectional emotional participation between selves. To attempt separation stimulates anxiety, absorbs energy and collapses efficient, organic possibilities.

Bioscience has begun to understand how self is experienced. Self appears to be emotionally created, a non-physical emotional state, which originates in our physical body and organizes in our brain. Corsini's comparison, of the manifest personalities of the three dominant makers of psychology with their systems of psychotherapy, suggests a direct relationship and collaboration exists between selves (Corsini, 1956). Monty's drive to have his sense of self verified by imagined relationships with his keepers, suggests the same thing -- organization (definition) of one's self is not independent of other selves. Efficiency requires considering the self as a non-self or collective self, a unifying phenomenon connecting living systems.

## **Respect for Systems**

Understanding self as a unified, collective phenomenon has powerful implications. It allows regression, back to the wisdom of the ancients where collective self was honored and celebrated, where awareness allowed room for collective and fluid development of functional emotions and cultures. It takes us back to times when survival demanded respect for the connectivity of systems (ecosystems, biosystems, family/clan systems), when all things were known to be integral parts of nature's whole -- before tolerance for imbalance (Sahara dust covering Belizian coral reefs, rainforest destruction, ozone, global warming and protracted war) and anxiety became the norm.

Strategies of psychotherapy have developed with respect for unity and the functioning of organic systems. The Hakomi Method of Psychotherapy (Kurtz, 1990) is an example of evolved theory, developed from modern and post-modern theories, with reverence for ancient wisdom. Hakomi's founding group -- its parts, contributed to the evolution of a more efficient whole process. The word Hakomi itself illuminates the Method. Hakomi is a Hopi Indian word with two related meanings, "Who are you?" and "How do you stand in relation to these many realms."

Hakomi has a solid foundation in principals of unity, organicity and non-violence. In practice, it is a strategy of supporting the "making sense of who one is" in relation to the many realms of life. Hakomi therapists honor the participation of their self and its potential to influence. Effort is made to remain transparent and emotionally at rest, allowing the client space to learn and explore. The strategic use of mindfulness and self-witnessing are taught, and along with little experiments, support awareness of the step-by-

step, systematic processes involved in the organization of the self's emotional experience.

## **Orientating with Systems**

How system oriented relational therapies, like Hakomi, are effective and efficient is becoming clearer now that neuroscience has focused greater attention on emotions and physiological processes. New research offers understandings of biological processes, especially neural processes, which support the intrinsic processes and principals of relational therapies; providing opportunities to glean valuable insight supported by empirical findings, and regain a solid foundation to make sense of who we are and where we are going with psychotherapy. Awareness of systematic emotional and relational processes, vital to self's discovery, is a very important insight we can glean from The Hakomi Method. Neuroscience offers us how these processes develop and participate in organizing the experience of knowing one's self.

The Triage Method of Psychotherapy (Bornt, 2007) is an adaptation of Hakomi into extra-therapeutic (life outside of therapy) experiences. In The Triage Method the ability to notice and track system development is utilized to effect relationships while participating in life, while systematic processes are weaving self's fabric. The method supports an appreciation that systematic processes are not the thread, not the fabric and not the self. They are the motivation behind how the threads are woven, how the experience of a self is created -- like in swarming they are the individual (parts) decisions informing the whole. Neurobiological research has shown that influencing parts are not only the various internal processes of the individual but also the radiant processes of others. The whole is a radiant emotional field. Understanding this weaving process is critical to developing healthy emotional fabric.

## **Instinctual Systems**

Jaak Panksepp, PhD., Baily Endowed Chair of Animal Well-Being Science, University of Washington, has written extensively about several primary, "instinctual" emotional systems mammals utilize to survive. According to Dr. Panksepp's empirical research, fear, anger, separation distress (panic), investigatory processes, anticipatory eagerness, and rough-and-tumble play are all "instinctual" mechanisms in the body, which inform the brain's emotional processes (Panksepp, 1998).

Dr. Panksepp suggests the separation distress system, for example, evolved to detect separation -- when separation from others was not good for survival. In doing its part in survival this system generates instinctual neural impulses, which are affective signals, when it detects separation. The neural affects travel to the brain where they sponsor instinctual "panic" feelings, which are then processed into emotions. Panksepp further suggests our relations and

attachments to objects (really anything the brain can hold a mental pattern or image of -- a person, place, thing, song, idea or state of mind) are *learned* in relation to these mechanisms or impulses.

Instinctual mechanisms do not operate independently nor in isolation. They are systematically engaged in an ongoing exchange. When separation is detected separation signals are activated, and so are signals of fear, anticipation, investigation and aspects of play. Collectively, they attempt to regulate (survive) the experience as efficiently (a survival imperative) as possible, becoming a woven fabric of systems influencing systems. Relations and attachments to objects are "learned" into these systems, as they become integral "regulatory" influences woven into the systematic fabric; creating self-influencing feedback loops constantly weaving self's fabric -- like the weaving of a swarm.

This understanding offers tremendous potential for greater efficiencies in developing functional emotional wellbeing, especially if the emotional attachment our society seems to have with external objects could be thought of as an expression of a "cultural self" defined by separation distress. Individualizing the self may be tearing the fabric, where relationships and attachments to other selves once regulated our emotions, the brain now substitutes possession and consumption of objects in its attempt to satisfy or calm the separation panic. Unfortunately, sedating our selves with substitution doesn't appear to be creating a happy, healthier culture.

## **Evolving Brain Modules**

The archeologist, Steve Mithen argues that early human brains had different and distinct modules with specific capacities for intelligence, social skills, tool skills, mechanical skills and history or classifying skills. He suggests that it was a genetic change in the brain that allowed these modules to suddenly communicate, causing a great leap forward in human consciousness.

I would argue that these capacities were available in the brain all along, regulated by environmental influences on Panksepp's instinctual survival systems. As groups of humans became cultures, survival pressures must have influenced specific expressions or systems of expressions. If critters became scarce, survival would have demanded more efficient tools. Instinctual mechanisms to investigate, play and even utilize history (combining what has worked into something better) could have "automatically" come up with tying a handle on a sharp rock for leverage in killing, or the use of cultivation as an alternative. Survival would have then demanded the idea's rapid expansion throughout culture.

Survival's pressure could have further defined culture and families by culling for dominance of particular instinctual systems, which appeared to be evidence of modules. A

family or cultural unit could survive best with a certain number of members with dominant fear mechanisms, anticipatory eagerness or rough-and-tumble play. Having all members fearfully waiting at the cave opening for a playmate would impact survival. Somebody needed to figure out the best tools, engage with neighbors and classify threat.

### **Temperament as Instinct**

Selecting a useful assortment of dominant instinctual systems could also help explain the limited variances of innate temperament mapped by Kelsey, sensitivity to the environment, intensity of emotional response, baseline mood, biological cycles and reaction to novel situations. There are correlations between Panksepp's systems of fear, anger, separation distress, investigatory processes, anticipatory eagerness, and rough-and-tumble play with innate temperament.

My discussions with Monty didn't start out with great details about his past. We spent time during the day getting acquainted, preceding our time around the fire. I watched Monty, he never sat still, always going and coming from little projects he would think of, mostly simple things he said needed to be done. Many times I asked if I could help, each time it was, "No, I've got it." I felt we were not really connecting, not in relationship for most of that time. He was very self-reliant, both physically and emotionally.

We had several political conversations as he moved about. He stayed within hearing range or I followed him at a distance to keep them flowing. His detached self-reliance may have been motivated by distrust, but was it developmental or innate? The Hakomi Method tends to view this as a developmental character strategy, a learned distrust of others being there and at the same time hoping they are. My own research with incarcerated young men, actually boys locked up for slightly less than felonies, showed strong relationships between Hakomi character strategies and expressed temperaments. In hindsight, Panksepp's instinctual systems, temperament and expressions of character all seem to define innate processes, reliant upon environmental influence for their complexity.

### **Character as Influence**

It seemed obvious Monty was eager to have my help and conversation. At the same time, I felt a fluctuating anxiety when he went too far or got too close; one I couldn't track as originating within myself. Monty's movement back and forth within hearing range indicated he wanted to relate (to attach). His doing everything himself portrayed what The Hakomi Method refers to as a self-reliant character strategy. It also points to Panksepp's instinctual separation alert system. I believe Monty came into the world a point man, genetically organized to take care of business and investigate. His world influenced the intensity. Just after

dark we collected by the fire for our first true conversation. The smoke keeping the mosquitoes at bay influenced his choices -- it was safer with me at the fire.

I thought about this as we started the next morning -- his not accepting my help and the impulses to both attach and separate. They really defined who he was, who he knew himself to be and influenced my interaction to be potentially verifying. However, I chose to remain emotionally available, emotionally present even when I felt reflective, counter impulses to detach (He didn't accept my help, I stop offering).

Before we started digging he went off to the edge of the woods to gather five heavy sections of PVC pipe for our drain. I yelled after him, "Hey, you want some help with those." Very quietly, almost reflecting off the wooded background I heard, "No I got it." Then, "Well maybe one, if you want." That was it. I knew. Monty now trusted me. His instincts were to not trust, to go it alone like a point man in the Vietnam jungle. But my relentless emotional presence influenced his systematic processes. Next came the deeper conversation about his experience in the SHU and my equal participation in the digging.

### **Neural Complexity of Self**

If we are to learn greater efficiency in supporting wellbeing, neuroscience is where we must continue, with an appreciation for the complexity it offers. We will have to sharpen our capacity to notice the development of emotions, originating as neural processes in the visceral body, into consciousness.

Dr. Steven W. Porges' Polyvagal Theory (Porges, 2004) and Paul Pearsall, Ph.D.'s research on cellular memory, particularly the heart (Pearsall, 1998), offer scientific explanations of how the self is organized by systematic emotional impulses; arising from the stream of ongoing sensory information exchanged between and within individuals. How emotions weave experience, how we know we are having experience and how we reflect on experience as a process of managing life, involves the elucidation of consciousness; accepting the fact that consciousness and emotions are inseparable, and that our sense of self is a unique emotional state arising out of consciousness (Damasio, 1999).

The complexity and intellectualization on matters of consciousness and neural function in relation to psychotherapy will be expanded in future writing. For the purpose of this article they need not limit our development of more efficient methods of supporting wellbeing. Let us continue with the discussion of the self and the bidirectional influences on its development.

## **Mirror Neurons**

Giaccamo Rizzollati recently discovered a cluster of neurons in the ventral premotor area of monkey's brains. These neurons were initially thought to exist in humans at birth then slowly fade away, but Rizzollati and others excited by his discovery have shown them to remain active in humans throughout the life span.

Researchers found that when a monkey, and later a person, performs a specific single task, specific neurons fire in response. Then, contrary to what's known about motor "command" neurons, they discovered these neurons would also fire when the monkey, or later a person, observed another monkey doing the same single task. Thus, they became known as mirror neurons. The first monkey's neurons mirrored the neural firings of the second's, when the second reached for peanuts. First time a newborn sees your tongue go out or you smile, it feels the emotion and fires off a smile. The second time it anticipates the feeling at the slightest indication of your smile and smiles or simply initiates the feeling by smiling itself. The emotional association is learned, complexity begins and systems become the foundation of organized experience across a lifetime.

V.S. Ramachandran describes the discovery of mirror neurons as "the single most important "unreported" (or at least, unpublicized) story of the decade". Predicting that "mirror neurons will do for psychology what DNA did for biology: They will provide a unifying framework and help explain a host of mental abilities that have hitherto remained mysterious and inaccessible to experiments (Ramachandran, 2000)."

The understanding of mirror neurons can be the foundation for change in psychotherapy as Ramachandran suggests. It provides the information of how the brain is allowed to experience the emotions of others, to find meaning and motivation behind behavior, and to use imitation to learn from others.

Culturally, they motivate the continuance of certain instinctual mechanisms and character, much like their influence on the spread of tools, art and song. The activities of mirror neuron are not necessarily conscious cognitions, and can participate in complex layers of information exchange. Ramachandran speculates mirror neuron allowed for the development of language. Vocal sounds initiated as mating calls, became complex (perhaps into song) and duplicable through mirroring -- into the deeply integrated neural system of language. His thinking on this has implications for using language and conscious cognitions in the emotional healing process, especially as science is illuminating older neural system relationships in the development of consciousness and the sense of self.

## **Utilizing Mirror Neurons**

In Monty's situation it may be easy to contemplate a process of mirror neurons affecting his experience where the guards and/or judge are thought to have experienced his inner emotional state as he came before them, felt empathy, then acted in response. That process could be defined by transference/counter transference. The potential, however, is much greater.

Let's imagine Monty's inner emotional state was conveyed along with his ability to regulate it. What the guards and judge may have then experienced and expressed was an imitation, having learned from Monty how to regulate emotions. Monty had told me he was not only the only white person, but the only white, defiant, long-haired person in the mix, and before being segregated in solitary he had felt a great deal of resentment and prejudice. (This was Illinois in the early 1970s). But yet, at sentencing they were all contained and direct, down to the business at hand.

Another example is Marylyn, a young woman involved in group therapy. She presented with denial of her past and any potential influences it may have on her current situation, not wanting to explore them for fear enormous emotions might overwhelm her. One night when another group member came in she immediately felt deep sadness. As he sadly informed the group he was feeling terrible about a close friend in the process of dying, she witnessed him remain lively, expressive and even able to laugh -- flowing through a range of emotions, not stuck in deep sadness. Marylyn's sadness slowly went away and she was left with emotions she could finally identify as empathy.

The following week Marylyn reported that for some unknown reason she had started thinking about her past and how it may be impacting her life. She didn't seem anxious or afraid to share some of her thoughts with the group. She hadn't processed them or disassociated. She had learned the systematic emotional process of regulating her experiences from the other member's example.

## **Psychotherapy's Potential**

The potential of mirror neurons is very subtle. It happens throughout all relationships. Marylyn's development could have easily been redirected or influenced by an interruptive or directive therapist. If her earlier fear had influenced the therapist and the therapist had countered with a protective radiance, Marylyn may have experienced incongruence and systematically withdrawn to her safer emotional state of denial.

These new understandings clearly demonstrate that therapists, parents, educators and politicians cannot escape their involvement in influencing the emotional development, and thus sense of self -- of others. They can develop an awareness and mentor healthy, emotional functioning



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through utilizing an understanding of instinctual mechanisms, innate temperament, character and the influence mirror neurons have on co-creation of one's self.

Therapists specifically have an opportunity to more efficiently support clients in developing greater wellbeing by honoring and exploring the systematic processes involved.

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