

Hakomi Conference Experience

“Mindfulness, Brain and Body in Psychotherapy”:

Katie Cofer, MFT

Editor’s Note: The International Hakomi Conference of 2008 in conjunction with Naropa University in Boulder was a wonderful event, as was its predecessor in 2005. Here Katie Cofer offers a personal perspective on the conference. Katie has written a number of articles for the *Bridge*, a quarterly journal serving the Bay Area (bridgeinfo@hotmail.com), where this article first appeared.

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ABSTRACT: Writer/therapist Katie Cofer offers a personal perspective on attending the 2008 Hakomi Conference at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado.

Psychotherapists, probably more than other professions, are very apt to go on a so-called “busman’s holiday”. This is in part, but not solely, due to the mandate to pursue continuing education. The obligation (for MFTs) to obtain 36 hours of “CEUs” in a 2-year licensure period does not by itself explain the pull to spend one weekend a month for a year, or two, or three, not to mention untold sums of money, to be trained in a particular approach, or to study at the knee of a master therapist. (Quite beyond personal growth or the master’s cachet, though, the “CEU cruises” to Cabo do sound alluring.) For myself personally, however, this year I opted to spend my continuing education dollars on the Hakomi Conference in Boulder, Colorado.

Faithful *Bridge* readers may recall my description of the Hakomi Method (Winter 2007, Volume 2, Issue 2) as an experiential, body-centered, mindfulness-based approach to psychotherapy. But you wouldn’t have to be Hakomi-trained to have felt drawn to this particular gathering. Its title, “The Essential Connection: Mindfulness, Brain and Body in Psychotherapy” unites some of the hottest topics presently circulating in the field, each of which has been previously featured in the pages of this newsletter.

Accordingly, the conference was a meeting ground for a wide range of practitioners of the healing arts, going way beyond just psychotherapists to include bodyworkers, acupuncturists, yoga teachers, organizational consultants, psychiatrists and neuroscientists (yes! mainstream physicians, armed with research projects and more); voice teachers, dancers, and energy healers. A motley assortment, numbering about 280, and yet what drew us all from our various corners – and from places as distant as Hawaii, Germany and Australia – was our fundamental belief in the importance of augmenting the power of words in working with disorders of the mind and emotions with the wisdom of

the body. And, our dedication to studying the messages of the body for more information about the afflictions of the soul, and for resources for healing. And, our excitement about these resources that are rooted both in the cutting edge of neuroscience and in ancient wisdom traditions such as yoga and Buddhist meditation. This common ground was our own “essential connection” that deepened and became increasingly rich over the four days of the conference.

This unity – which, incidentally, is one of the five guiding principles of the Hakomi method of therapy – was palpable in the group sessions and keynote presentations. The topics discussed there – trauma (a constantly recurring theme), attachment (which, of course, is just another word for connection) and application of neuroscience to therapy – were at the heart of the conference’s material. Many of the 50 presentations in the five workshop sessions echoed these themes, from an amazing multiplicity of perspectives. These ranged from the more pragmatic (**The Body Beloved: Essential Connection at Your Fingertips**) to the abstract/theoretical (**The Missing Interpersonal Experience in the Light of Neurobiology and Complexity Theory**) to the almost mystical (**Listening with a Third Ear: Developing the Heart of a Mindful Therapist**).

My own choices from this menu included both the soberly serious and the playfully experiential. In **Healing the Effects of War’s Violence**, MFT Robert Bornt presented his very moving use of Hakomi in working with traumatized veterans in Oceanside, CA. In **Is Mindfulness an Antioxidant?** Psychiatrist Jeff Berger, from Sedra-Woolley, WA, discussed his experiences with mindfulness in working with cognitively impaired geriatric patients and, especially, their caregivers. **Voicing the Self: Be Seen and Heard** and **Embodying the Self in the Presence of Other: Authentic Movement as a Body/Mindfulness Practice**, therapists

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Eve Maisonpierre, from Boulder, and Maya Galen Shaw, from Santa Barbara, guided us into experiences with voice and movement that sprang from our deepest core. And in my personal favorite, **Embracing Embodiment: Igniting the Body's Wisdom and Celebrating the Body Ecstatic**, Rachel Fleischman, working with a blend of music, art, poetry, and, of course, ecstatic dance, created a space of joyful liberation. (We are fortunate to have Rachel here in the Bay Area, where she offers workshops, groups, and individual sessions. She can be found at www.dancingyourbliss.com.)

For many, including myself, the highlight of the conference was renowned trauma expert Bessel van der Kolk's presentation. Bessel has been working on the front lines of the trauma field for more than 30 years, both in the trenches as a clinician and in the lab as a neuroscientist. For many years a psychiatrist with the Veteran's Administration, he worked extensively with Viet Nam vets and was instrumental in getting Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder "legitimized" as a mental disorder. He continues his groundbreaking work at his own trauma center in Massachusetts and is a hero of the body psychotherapy world because of his insistence on the need for incorporating the body into trauma treatment, and his

endorsement of body/mind therapy modalities for trauma such as EMDR, Somatic Experiencing, and Sensorimotor Psychotherapy. He is also known for his dynamic presentation style and bold humor (who of those present will ever forget his description of a certain very noted politician immediately following the 9/11 attacks as "a man without a frontal lobe"?). His emphasis of the immobilizing effect of traumatic "freezing" and his exhortation of clinicians to follow his example in amplifying their compassion with dynamism and magnetism, to help patients regain access to their aliveness will be an inspiration for a long time to come.

Therapists could probably meet their entire CEU requirements for less than fifty dollars online. But it is only through the "essential connection" of spending four days' worth of learning and growing with like-minded colleagues from all over the world, of being immersed together in the Hakomi principles of Unity, Mindfulness, Nonviolence, Organicity, and Mind/Body Holism – and of cutting the rug together at the legendary Saturday night dance – that we can re-inspire ourselves, that we can keep ourselves open, alive, juicy, and effective in this healing work that is so necessary for our well-being in the world as it is today. And that is something that no CEU.com can provide.