

Ron Kurtz USABP Interview

Serge Prengle

Editor's Note: Ron Kurtz, DHL, is the originator of the Hakomi Method of Body-Centered Psychotherapy and the method of Mindfulness Based, Assisted Self Study. He is a preeminent influence in progressive psychotherapy. Author or co-author of influential books, published in several Western languages (*Body-Centered Psychotherapy*, *The Body Reveals*, and *Grace Unfolding*) and three books in Japanese. Ron has led hundreds of trainings and workshops around the world over the last quarter of a century. At present he is leading trainings and workshops where he lives in Ashland, OR, and other places that can be found by contacting him at rktinc@ronkurtz.com. This interview was done at the United States Association for Body Psychotherapy 2008 Conference where Ron was given the Lifetime Achievement Award for his contributions to the field.

Serge Prengle, a therapist in New York City who sees therapy as a creative, experiential process, is the host of the USABP's Somatic Perspectives on Psychotherapy. He writes that they "are a 'Talk Radio' of sorts. The tone is informal, far from any academic discourse. Every month, a new person is interviewed. The interviews can be downloaded as an mp3 file (and played on an iPod or any other mp3 player) or listened to directly on the site, where they are permanently archived (www.USABP.org). The following is a transcript of the original audio, which is part of the *Somatic Perspectives on Psychotherapy* on the USABP website (www.USABP.org), and can also be linked at www.SomaticPerspectives.com. Please note that this conversation was meant to be a spontaneous exchange, not an edited piece. For better or worse, the transcript retains the unedited quality of the conversation.

ABSTRACT: Serge Prengle, host of the United States Association for Body Psychotherapy "Somatic Perspectives on Psychotherapy" audio series, interviews Ron Kurtz, the originator of Hakomi Therapy. The interview covers how Kurtz experiences the work, how it evolved, and the mechanisms that support its effectiveness. Various aspects of mindfulness and loving presence are explored.

Serge Prengle: Hello, I'm with Ron Kurtz. Hi Ron.

Ron Kurtz: Hiya, how are you Serge?

S P: So in this conversation, we're going to talk more about you personally, and you're role. And just before starting the recording I was sharing with you that sense of seeing you as somebody who loves, has a lot of pleasure from self-discovery, and from sharing the pleasure of self-discovery with others.

R K: Okay. There is for me a great pleasure in the work, in just helping find a way to bring something out the person's unconscious that we can resolve and have them feel. . . . Well there's another step. Once the issue is resolved it means that they can take in a kind of emotional nourishment or mental nourishment that they weren't able to take in before. And it's very much h like somebody in the desert getting a cold glass of water. . . . It's that good if you've waited all your life for something. A simple example would be somebody who has a chronic underlying fear, a lot of people have something like that, and suddenly they feel safe. Suddenly they realize in this place, I'm safe. It feels marvelous; as you say, pleasurable.

S P: Yeah, it feels marvelous. And this analogy of somebody who's been in the desert and has a cold drink to have . . . so something that you've been needing, and something that is so necessary.

R K: Yeah, yeah to have a complete life; to be available for something that you weren't available for, a good thing that you're available for now that you weren't available for before. That's the goal of the work, you know, to find those things.

S P: And so that goes with your not wanting to approach things from the point of view of medicine, pathology?

R K: Right, right. I think of it as, I don't want to get too technical, but I think of it as old adaptations that haven't been reexamined. You had some situation probably in you're early life that you had to build protection around. And you still have that building but you don't need it anymore. I see that all the time.

S P: And so, how has it evolved for you?

R K: Oh, lets see. Well you said "it"; I don't know which "it" evolved.

S P: The whole thing.

R K: The whole thing, well it's a big thing. There were lots of big steps since I've started out. Basically imitating the medical model that I have been acquainted with, and eventually I tried some things, and some events happened that changed my mind about something. Piece by piece I evolved into what I do now. And the big evolutions were realizing, first of all, that I didn't need to take a history, that I didn't need to try to ask a lot of questions and find out

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about this person. I could find out about them by looking and listening to the tone of voice, I didn't have to follow the words very much. Once in a while a key word comes up.

And then I learned about loving presence, I learned how to put myself in a state of mind that automatically finds something pleasurable about the person, something that evokes good feelings in me and those good feelings are communicated non-verbally from my limbic to their limbic. So if I'm in a state where I really feel good about this person, instead of looking for a pathology, for example, that affects them. That changes the context for them. They have a friend. And not only do they have a friend, but they don't have to think about this, this just happens on a physiological level. Not only do they have a friend, because I'm doing things that demonstrate -- some subtle things too -- that I understand what's going on. They have a friend that's intelligent enough to follow them, to understand what's going on and that's a great context to work from.

SP: The friend who understands them and who is intelligent enough to follow them and provide the context . . . yeah.

R K: Yeah. So those are big evolutions for me. Then I learned a couple very important things about using silence. You watch the clients so you know when they need you to be silent, when they need me to be silent. That's very important because it gives them a chance to find their way, and the way that they find their way is that these spontaneous impulses will come up which really direct the process for me. I typically follow whatever comes up spontaneously in the client, do something with it. And I guess the last thing, I've always known this, but there's a taboo in general academic psychology about comforting clients, about touching them and well, I do it all the time. Not personally, because I have assistants who do that. So that is very significant, very important. It's one of the things that were missing during these early adaptations. Nobody comforted this person.

SP: So there is a sense of extending the setting as one where there is this comfort. And when you talk about mindfulness, what I notice when I see you work is that you don't spend a lot of time telling people what mindfulness is, but you create it with your presence so that people will get it through the resonance, through the context you provide.

R K: Right, through the tone of voice, the pace.

SP: The tone of voice, the pace.

R K: I can also watch for the external signs of mindfulness in the other person. So that when I'm doing that, I can begin to see when their being mindful, and then I can do what I have to do.

SP: Yeah, so that you notice what is there of the mindfulness you're helping them get more into it. And so, in

a way, instead of just talking to people about it, you simply lead them through it and through the experience of being mindful.

R K: It's a little bit like a dance. Where I know the dance and I'm kind of dancing with them until they get it. I got that from . . .

SP: Okay so, but the dance there is that as you notice these indicators, it helps you to be more in tune with them. And as you are in tune with them and you slow the pace, and you bring it to that more mindful thing, they in turn are more able to follow your pace.

R K: Yeah, yeah that's true, yeah. It's a beautiful experience on that level. It's a more intimate experience. The distance evaporates when I work.

SP: So you know, over the years you have simplified the model.

R K: Yes, yes exactly. I was listening to a talk by Murray Gell-Mann about beauty and science and physics and something like that, how the most important discoveries always, there's some kind of simplicity in them. He talks about the form getting simpler. I had another thought about that, but it flew out of my head. (laughter). It'll come back.

SP: But something about the simplicity?

R K: You have to drop what's unnecessary. There were so many unnecessary things I had been doing that I don't have to do. And a big general one, this is very hard for some people to get, is don't slip into a conversation. It's a dance, it's not about talking and questions and figuring out. You have to do some figuring, but you better be dancing when you're doing it. You don't stop. Oh yeah, now I remember, it's a quote from some scientist who said, "Every great leap in science was occasioned by the giving up of a great prejudice." We have to give up our prejudices about disease and about defenses. I don't call them defenses, these are management behaviors. This is somebody managing their behavior, managing their experiences. It's not personal, it's not like I'm attacking them. They just have this adaptive habit of protecting themselves that way, of managing their experience that way.

SP: So you know there is a dance at different levels. There is the dance that you have with the person you're working with, and then the dance that the person has had with their environment and how they have learned some adaptations to it.

R K: Right, so we have to learn a new dance. Because your mind will create the idea that this is similar to some old situation, you know, you've got a whole set of possible situations. You pick one, and that's the one you think you're in. And so you won't pick the ones that you've

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already shut out, like nobody loves me, or its never really safe, or something terrible could happen. You know all of these. They don't see safe situations or situations where they're being loved, so I have to help them experience something new, something new and positive.

S P: So you see the dance they're in, the steps they're making as an adaptation to, you know, their environment. And then you lead them into the possibility of there being another way to dance.

R K: Yes, I help them discover that. First I have to help them discover what they're doing automatically, which is like making the unconscious conscious. And I do that by studying external signs, like with indicators, certain behaviors, certain habits, even if they're postural habits or facial expressions or tone of voice or pace -- those habits suggest to me what might be the adaptations they are making. Which means I know what kinds of experience they're trying to manage. I like to give the example of the person who doesn't look at you straight but has their eyes looking at you like they're skeptical or doubtful. I feel that they must have been betrayed. They must have been lied to or tricked or something; manipulated. So I have a good guess about what it is, and I can test my guesses using these experiments with the client and mindfulness. It's very simple; the process is very simple.

S P: Yeah, you say its very simple and its very quick; its not something where it takes you a long history or you know just look at something, and in a moment there's something that catches your attention, like the eyes that are not looking straight.

R K: Yeah, I saw that the other day. Some of them were really fast (laughter). But it's possible if you practice thinking that way and working that way that they become obvious. These indicators become obvious. Everybody's got one, nobody's in neutral out there. If he is, he's a Buddha. Follow him around, borrow some peace of mind.

S P: So very quickly you get an indicator, and that indicator gives you a guess. And it's not a diagnosis, it's a guess.

R K: You always test it as a guess. I have a lot of experience with indicators, so it's probably a good guess, probably a good guess.

S P: Yeah

R K: And I'm not bragging. It's a matter of you can learn these things. You start looking for them.

S P: And then you play, you experiment, you test?

R K: An experiment is a design to help this person realize what's going on. So the person who is skeptical or doubtful or been betrayed, I would say something like -- I would ask

them to be mindful. When I see that they're mindful and they tell me that they're mindful I'll say something like, "You can trust me", which is exactly what they can't do. And they'll get a reaction that tells them that, you know, they'll hear a voice that says, "Don't do that" or "Bullshit" or something will come up, they'll start to be afraid. So I have evoked this situation, a piece of the situation that created that adaptation. And from there we can easily process.

S P: So in a way what's been happening is that from that indicator, from that piece of body related behavior, you see what the crux of the person's drama is.

R K: Could be; something like that.

S P: And with just a few words you just create the drama, you bring it to consciousness.

R K: Consciousness, awareness, yeah. So it's not like asking questions about it or anything like that which will not work generally. You do an experiment in mindfulness; the person has a reaction if it's a good experiment, accurate. And they can't doubt their reaction. They can doubt my words. I could tell them, "Well I think you're afraid, I don't think you trust people". "Oh yeah, I trust people," you know, you could do that for days (laughter). But once they see their own reaction, there's no doubt inside us, there's no argument.

S P: It's not a question, because you're bypassing the judgment part. You're just going into the . . .

R K: It's not a diagnosis; it's a real live experience. If I'm silent at those times, if I let that experience sink in, very often a memory will arise that makes sense of it. And that's when we can deal with the pain of that memory and resolve it somewhat . . . help the person make sense of what happened. Like very often in Germany I'll have to reach a place in people where I tell them, "Well, I think your parents must have been affected by the war." I want them to understand, make sense of what happened to them. And it helps, that's one of the ways it gets resolved. (mystery noise). What's that, a doorbell?

S P: (In response to mystery noise) That's just like in the movies

R K: (In response to mystery noise). Are you getting messages from outer space? That's an encounter, that's a close encounter. (Both laugh).

S P: It's the perfect accompaniment to that notion of making sense, you know you were using that expression of making sense. And I related to this notion of self-discovery.

R K: Self-discovery, yeah. You discover this memory in a situation, and there may be more than one situation, that

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created your behavior . . . that created your adaptation which is now running your behavior. That's discovery; you discover how you're organized. You discover why you do what you do. And when that's conscious, you can change your mind.

SP: *Yeah*

RK: When it's unconscious, you can't.

SP: *So in a way, it's the same thing as a quest for purpose, you know that sense of organization that's not a purpose that's imposed from the outside, but discovering how you're organized to face the environment in a certain way.*

RK: How you became who you are, yeah, and your way of doing things, yeah. It's wonderful and you get a sense of freedom, you decide to be free. Which is exactly what spiritual traditions are of; mindfulness, they will free you up.

SP: *So maybe that's good as you mentioned, the spiritual traditions about mindfulness. Many people are intimidated by the word, "mindfulness".*

RK: They are.

SP: *And we think, "Yeah, okay, you can do all this stuff if people are in mindfulness, but the trick is to bring them there. So for somebody who has not experienced, who has not seen your work, maybe the word mindfulness would seem like a big barrier.*

RK: Okay, so we can simplify it. You just have to be calm enough and attentive to your own reactions, we don't have to say "mindfulness" at all. If you're calm enough and steady and available to notice your reaction, which means you, have to relax your activity. You can't be busy doing something if you're going to notice your reactions. That's all they need to do, you don't need to spend six hours sitting in meditation. That will help you right there, that's clear, simple.

SP: *So just enough to notice, just enough, just you know, just quiet enough to just pay attention to what's happening.*

RK: Right. And what happens spontaneously, what happens, what is evoked automatically from these little experiments.

SP: *And I notice you don't necessarily use the word mindfulness when you talk to people, you talk about noticing what's happening.*

RK: Yeah. It's not necessary for two reasons. One is it's much easier to understand if you explain it in simple terms. And I can watch them and see, I can pace them a little bit

and watch when they get mindful. You know there are signs of mindfulness. So you don't have to use the word.

SP: *So in a way what's more important is your own mindfulness as a therapist, you know, as a presence.*

RK: Yeah, yeah yeah.

SP: *And the ability to observe your own and other people there.*

RK: Yeah. I have to be present for everything that happens in this sequence. I have to watch all the changes. So there's a kind of presence you have to have. When I talk about loving presence, it's very necessary to be very glued to what's going on right now, with you and them.

SP: *So that loving presence is another definition, another way of focusing or retaining or staying in that state of mindfulness as a therapist.*

RK: I never equated those, but that's close. Presence is definitely part of mindfulness . . . maybe compassion too. I'll have to think about this longer (laughter).

SP: *So in your own journey of getting there, can you think about people or experience or events that you can think now as building blocks?*

RK: You know, I made a long list last night, because I have to give a talk. Not a talk, I'm just going to say thanks. I was looking for those significant people and what they did. Several of them from back in graduate school, some of them encouraged me to go to group therapy, another was to do workshops with her still. And several people encouraged me that way. I did workshops with lots of different people during the years as a co-therapist or a co-workshop leader. And one really big event, I think the event that sealed my fate was a workshop I did as a participant with Will Shutz at San Francisco State. I was excited for weeks. I knew that's what I wanted to do. I watched what he did and I knew I wanted to do that. And I really made that decision right then. I have pursued it ever since.

SP: *So what was it in that experience that was so powerful?*

RK: Well it was totally different for one, than I would have expected from psychotherapy. It had experiments; he'd have people try things out. He had us do exercises; you know these kind of experiential exercises. And I just got so excited, it was so much fun. And it was so fascinating to watch him work. It was dramatic and I just knew I didn't want the same dry conversational stuff. I had read Freud when I was fourteen, and this was not the stuff. I knew even then that he had more variables than he had data points. You know, he could explain everything (laughter).

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SP: But he was having fun doing it.

R K: He was having fun and he had some good insights too. But it wasn't science as much as it could have been. And now it's getting very scientific, I like that. And then another guy named Ken Lux who I went to graduate school with who was a psychologist and a psychotherapist, he encouraged me, set me up in private practice, and that's when I first started doing therapy for a living. One thing led to another and finally I wrote this book with Hector Presteria about body reading which I learned somewhat from John Pierrakos. I mean, I went down, took him photographs and he'd read them for me. I could see what he was saying, and I knew those people, they were my patients. So John was a big influence.

SP: But I remember from that book the ideal, you know you were describing the exchange information between the various people. You were doing the other therapists. And this sense of looking at each other's photographs, you know, and of paying attention to it both in terms of a subject, and also the emotions that were brought up. So that the sense of experimenting with yourself as a sensor.

R K: Yeah, yeah. We did a lot of that in the trainings . . . what is your reaction when you see this or when somebody says that. I have people close their eyes and have them get mindful, and have somebody else standing there, and I have them open their eyes again and close them. And I have them notice their reaction to that. So what's your reaction? You have to sensitize yourself to getting that relation and doing it consciously. We do it unconsciously all the time, but to do it consciously, that puts you in a position to really work with people. Is this thing still jumping?

SP: Yeah it's working, it's still alive, another sensor, another indicator.

R K: So are we getting close to the end here?

SP: Yeah, I think so. I think we could at any time. Maybe just say a few words to end it, whatever needs to be said at this moment.

R K: Well I'm thinking now that I don't know how much more refinement I will discover in this method. But I know that I want to write more. You know, I have about 500 videotapes.

SP: Wow!

R K: And I'm going to do another hundred this summer. I have a very professional camera guy and I'll do lectures and sections. I have a big library of these things. I want to leave this body of material as my legacy . . . a thousand pages of writing. I want to clean that up and have this material archived somewhere. SBGI has offered to do that. So that will be my older years (laughter). But you know, I'm always surprised. I always get surprised by some new refinement. You read a book and you don't expect, "Oh wow", so maybe . . . maybe there'll be more.

SP: It's hard to believe how it could be simpler.

R K: Yeah it is. Who knows? Every changes, somehow. And Murray Gell-Mann was talking about the peeling of the onion. You know, at every level of this onion it gets simpler and simpler. There is something similar about the mathematics is what you were saying. I'm going to look for this now; I'm going to look for what's similar in these different stages of the development of the work. I haven't tried that yet. What is the essence of the mathematics? What is the essence of these similarities? Maybe I'll find it.

SP: Yeah, good. Thanks Ron.

R K: Thanks Serge.

This is part of USABP's "Somatic Perspectives" series, edited by Serge Prengel. Transcribed by Corinne Bagish. Transcript was not proofread.

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