

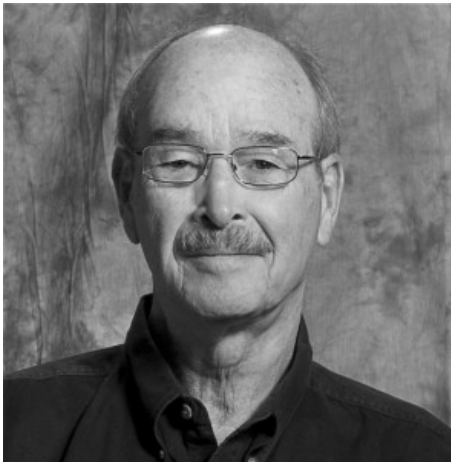
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Ronald S. Kurtz (1934-2011): A Remembrance

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Ron Kurtz, the brilliant and charismatic founder of the Hakomi Institute has died. The following is a brief outline of his life, followed by personal reflections on Ron and the beginnings and development of Hakomi Therapy.

Ronald S. Kurtz: 1934-2011

Ron Kurtz, the originator of Hakomi Therapy, who was born in Brooklyn in 1934, died in his adopted home town of Ashland, Oregon on January 4, 2011 of a heart attack.

Kurtz was an internationally renowned therapist who lectured and led workshops and trainings throughout the world. He was the author or co-author of three books that have been influential in the world of experiential psychotherapy: The Body Reveals with Hector Presteria, Body-Centered Psychotherapy: The Hakomi Method, and Grace Unfolding: Psychotherapy in the Spirit of the Tao-te ching with Greg Johanson.

Kurtz brought a background in science to his work in therapy. He did undergraduate work in physics and English, and worked in computer electronics before doing doctoral work in experimental psychology at Indiana University. He taught there and later at San Francisco State College, and was at one time the resident body-mind therapist at the Esalen Institute.

The Hakomi Therapy he developed was the first approach to psychotherapy to integrate the use of mindfulness and the mind-body interface, and to be based on principles from the field of complex living systems.

He was a founder of the United States Association for Body Psychotherapy, and was given their Lifetime Achievement Award in 2008. He was also awarded an honorary doctorate from the Santa Barbara Graduate Institute.

He is survived by his wife Terry and daughter Lily.

Ron's passing has me reminiscing about the good old amazing days when we all started down this mindfulness-centered, somatic-based path together that has been such a powerful healing force in the world of human growth,

healing, and psychotherapy, and so I'm offering here some historical notes.

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It all happened close on the heels of the 1960s with all that affected consciousness in those days. Into that cultural milieu stepped Ron Kurtz, with a background in physics, mathematics, electronics and Eastern wisdom traditions, who had done his doctoral work in experimental psychology before getting interested in psychotherapy. He didn't study in any one traditional school, but consulted a variety of master therapists and methods. These he evaluated and integrated on a pragmatic, eclectic basis, through the lens of complex living-systems theory. He definitely embodied the 1960s ethos of being willing to explore and experiment, exposing himself to a wide range of experiences without any constraining loyalties.

Likewise, we, the students and future Hakomi faculty, attracted to his workshops, were those post-60s practitioners disgruntled with status-quo psychology and its poor outcomes, primed to be attracted to a way of working that honored both contemporary science and ancient wisdom traditions, whether it was in accord with current standard teachings or not.

Those early days of experiencing Kurtz's workshops were magical in many ways. The work was alive and experiential, artistic and poetic, as well as being scientifically precise. Changing states of consciousness intensified present-moment awareness in a way that transcended tedious talk or emotional acting-out. The slowing down and expectant waiting, as practiced in the work, potentiated experiments in awareness and allowed persons to study how they organized habitually and automatically based on various inputs. Verbal and non-verbal experiments were devised, often from bodily clues, to present precisely the opposite of what a client's normally unconscious core organizers believed and employed to control both perception and response. Thus, barriers to organizing in something previously organized-out, like support or intimacy, were evoked and made available for further exploration.

Since experiments were normally set up in a theoretically positive, nourishing form, therapeutic strictures against gratifying were transformed into helping clients study how gratification was defended against. Paradoxically, slowing down, trusting organic wisdom, not pushing for a particular result, supporting defenses as they arose, encouraging curiosity, and savoring moved people along in their process further and faster. A compassionate, non-judging presence, an acute tracking and contacting of present moment experience, combined with a humor that affirmed one's creative capacities, functioned to unlock the cooperation of the unconscious and foster a spontaneous unfolding. There was a fresh, non-violent easiness to the work that pointed to a new paradigm: there could be change without force, as the process helped someone go where they wanted to go, on the

deepest levels within a thoroughly and consciously nourishing environment.

How all this magic went together in a theoretically coherent way was not immediately clear. A number of those who ended up becoming founding trainers of what later became the Hakomi Institute were struck that Kurtz was doing something remarkably effective and right. But when asked how he knew what to do when, he was not totally clear. Though he was a literal genius in such areas as math and science—earning in his youth the third highest math score of all high school students in Brooklyn—he was working quite spontaneously, drawing on multiple sources. It was obvious that there were influences from Gestalt, Bioenergetics, Pessio-Boyden Psychomotor Movement, Feldenkrais, NLP, Buddhist and Taoist sources, complex linear systems thinking and more, but the integration was unique. The work could be characterized as psychodynamic because one worked with core organizers that affected transference; it could also be characterized as a form of cognitive therapy, since one accessed and expanded core organizing beliefs, also a way of doing narrative therapy. The work was humanistic in the embrace of human potentials, and transpersonal in the use of a witnessing state of consciousness. One could work through dreams like Jungians, relational material like psychoanalysts, and through the body like many body-centered methods. But, Kurtz's work could not be fully understood or taught under any one of these umbrellas.

It was about this time that Bandler and Grinder (1975) published their book, *The Structure of Magic*, based on studying master psychotherapists to ascertain if there was any underlying structure to the seeming magic they did that could be passed on to others. We invited Ron to study himself, as we also studied him, to identify an underlying structure to help us learn and/or teach to others. After a number of years of analyzing Ron's talks and verbatim sessions, a linear structure *was* discovered, along with underlying principles, and a method was identified that could be passed on. It was at that point, after a number of years of creative ferment involving many people, that the Hakomi Institute was founded in 1981 as a training institution, and began to offer workshops and trainings with Ron Kurtz as the founder and director, and with Dyrian Benz, Jon Eisman, Greg Johanson, Pat Ogden, Phil Del Prince, Devi Records-Benz, and Halko Weiss as founding trainers.

The linear structure that Kurtz developed and was taught by practitioners of the Institute, included: establishing the therapeutic relationship (creating the conditions for mindful exploration); accessing (inviting mindfulness); deepening (sustaining mindfulness); processing (mindfully experimenting with transformation through taking in new

options); and integration-completion-homework (while transitioning back to ordinary consciousness). Hence, Hakomi represented the first therapeutic method to use mindfulness of the mind as the main therapeutic tool throughout a therapy session.

The name “Hakomi” (Hah-CO-Me) was received in a dream in the early days when there was no name for the work other than “body-centered psychotherapy,” a limiting term, though the method was and remains body-inclusive. David Winter, a student of Ron’s, had a dream in which Ron Kurtz handed him a piece of paper. When he opened the paper, he saw the word “Hakomi.” That was interesting, but no one knew what it meant. David, an anthropologist, went to his home library and discovered it was a Hopi Indian word that meant “How do you stand in relation to these many realms?” an ancient way of asking, “Who are you?” Since it fit perfectly with the mindful aspect of the work that helped people study how they organized themselves around input from various realms of experience, the name was adopted, despite its unfamiliarity to English speakers.

From its beginning, the Hakomi Method expanded rapidly. In the past 30 years, workshops and trainings have been taught throughout the United States, Europe, Mexico, Canada, Argentina, Japan, Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. The Hakomi faculty grew from the founding trainers, and developed local faculty in various countries as it developed internationally.

In 1992, Ron Kurtz resigned as director of the Hakomi Institute to form Ron Kurtz Trainings, headquartered in Ashland, Oregon. This enabled him to continue his inventive work of concentrating on the method itself, spontaneously and independently implementing any changes in the teaching he envisioned. Institutional encumbrances of what had become an international non-profit educational enterprise certified as a CEU provider for professional counselors and social workers, were thus precluded. Kurtz remained a senior trainer of the Hakomi Institute for many years, and remained an on-going inspiration. Both organizations recognized each other’s teaching of Hakomi, and certifications of therapists, teachers, and trainers. In recent years, Kurtz developed a shorter, simplified version of the Hakomi Method that was written about in the *Hakomi Forum*, and in manuscripts that Ron had in progress of publication. Hakomi Institute students were always encouraged to train with Kurtz whenever they had opportunity to benefit from his unique artistry, insight, and humor.

Now, we are all left with the powerful memory of his laughing, loving, insightful presence. Even those who are third-generation students, who never met him, have been touched by his brilliance, which was demonstrated in

developing a method that could be passed on to others without ever studying with him directly. Ron also left a large collection of videotapes and papers that will, hopefully, be archived in a readily accessible way.

The United States Association for Body Psychotherapy has graciously posted a tribute page for Ron on their website. I encourage anyone interested to go their page, <http://www.usabp.org/> and click on the link for leaving any personal tribute you might like to share.

I will end here with the tribute I posted in memory of this incredible human being, who was such a large part of my personal and professional life since those formative and magical days in the 70s.

Ron has been a profound influence in my life, for which I am utterly thankful. In addition to his bigger-than-life artistry, insight, and humor, I think the one word that expresses the inexpressible meaning of his life for me is freedom. He imparted to me the gift of freedom to not be intimidated by surrounding conventions and follow my intuition that mindfulness, the body, nourishing bonds, and grace could be helpful in human healing; to believe in the face of postmodern fragmentation that there could be a principled unity of knowledge allowing one to integrate insights from contemporary science and ancient spiritual-wisdom traditions as well; and to foster the truth in a wonderful community of dear people that we are indeed holons, a self-in-relation, many members of a larger body, where the increase of compassion is necessary for our common survival. I will sense his spirit of freedom always.

References:

Bandler, R. & Grinder, J. (1975). *The structure of magic: A book about language and therapy*. Palo Alto, CA: Science and Behavior Books.

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