

## **A psycho-dynamically trained psychologist's experience of Wilhelm Reich's Orgone Therapy**

*In the Swedish Journal of Psychotherapy "INSIKTEN Nr.3" (4/07/2009) gave Staffan Carazo an insight into Wilhelm Reich's theoretical development of psychoanalysis and related it to Reich's life story. Bruno Adler has reacted to the article and gives here his view on Reich's importance and tells about his own experience of the therapy developed by Reich.*

### **Much has been written about Wilhelm Reich.**

Many praise Reich for his psychoanalytic work on character while disparaging him as a sex-obsessed and paranoid mystic with hallucinations of a cosmic creative energy.

A closer look at the authors of such articles reveals that few have been in therapy with Reich, at least not for any length of time. They have usually not taken the trouble to verify for themselves the data and phenomena that Reich describes in his books.

In order to give a more accurate picture of Reich and his work, I want to tell you about my personal experiences as a patient of an Orgonomist. An Orgonomist is a psychiatrist trained in medical orgone therapy at the American College of Orgonomy (ACO), which was founded by Dr. Ellsworth Baker in 1961 at the request of Reich before he died in 1956. The ACO also organizes laboratory courses every year where interested parties can receive instruction in reproducing Reich's experiments and observing orgonomic phenomena themselves.

### **My first acquaintance with Reich**

In 1966, I became friends with a young American psychiatrist and first heard about Reich's orgonomy and its medical, psychological and social implications. I read some of Reich's books and became very curious.

He gave me the impression that he was an honest and dedicated scientist. During his life, he faced great difficulties, partly due to tragic events in his family. His mother committed suicide when his father found out that she had a lover. The political situation was very tense in Europe on the eve of the First World War and Reich was active in a left-wing movement called the Sex Police movement. Reich believed that the social system suppressed individuals' sexuality, which was a controversial idea. Also in psychoanalytic circles, Reich's research on biological energy and body therapy techniques were considered controversial, while Reich's theory of character analysis was widely accepted. The students who worked with him did not perceive him as paranoid. However, Reich was persecuted by the American McCarthy regime because of his previous left-wing political involvement (Sharaf 1983).

I thought at that time I understood Reich's views on the function of the orgasm. However, it was only some years later, when I had been in therapy, that the significance of the orgasmic potency became clearer. Freud believed that man's ability to sublimate his libidinal energy created the basis on which culture and civilization could develop. Reich, on the other hand, saw sexuality and the full experience of an exhaustive orgasm as a prerequisite for health,

both mental and somatic. Dr. Ellsworth Baker's book "Man in the Trap" describes the analogy between the mitosis of the single-celled animal and the human emotional and bodily experience of orgasm. The emotion is the sensation of the excitation and movement of orgone energy in the body.

### **A living organism under threat for a long period of time contracts.**

An example of this is an amoeba that is repeatedly teased with a needle. It responds by contracting and finally becoming immobile.

At this stage it can no longer divide. According to Reich, it is then armored. The function of mitosis is an energy metabolic process. The growth of a living cell is limited and when the tension of the membrane reaches a critical point, the animal divides into two and then returns to rest. In higher animal species such as humans, this "orgone metabolic function" manifests itself in a process known as orgasmic release.

If a child is exposed to prolonged physical or emotional trauma, such as an early disruption of attachment, the child becomes chronically armored.

This disrupts their emotional and somatic development, but not always their intellectual development. The fact that an armored individual can function, and to a limited extent, experience an orgasmic release, is due to the human ability to reduce the armor in the body. Blocking the perception of the body's emotional reactions and memories does this. Being able to disengage in this way is rooted in a mental-cerebral block. The armored amoeba cannot do this and dies instead.

Through his research, my friend said, Reich has developed a form of treatment that can dissolve this somatic and psychological armor. In this way, humans can once again use their unique mental qualities in the service of life.

All this led me to the following reasoning:

My life is only a brief moment in the infinite. If a fraction of what Reich's therapy offers is possible for me to achieve, it is worth trying! I moved to the US and found a licensed orgonomist in Philadelphia.

### **Some memories of my therapy**

This is how I remember my first session and it was not at all what I expected.

I knew that getting naked was part of body-oriented therapy. I had read that the color and temperature of the skin and the reaction of the muscles to manual palpation gave important information to the therapist. What surprised me was that the therapist asked me to open my eyes, roll them around while breathing deeply but softly with my chest and without tensing my stomach.

Thoughts began to swirl in my head and I thought about how in yoga and other traditional relaxation methods you should do abdominal breathing, usually with your eyes closed. Stop thinking, said the therapist and started to press on some points around my eyes. It hurt and I looked at him worriedly. Suddenly I felt an enormous fear inside and I started to scream. I became more and more wild in my despair and then the therapist asked me to stop. "You have no contact in your eyes and you are not focused," he said. He asked me to follow with my eyes the light of a flashlight that he moved across my face. Then he pressed me again, this time on my calf muscles. I started kicking and screaming again, my anger and gaze directed at the therapist. Something in the therapist's eyes seemed familiar and my heart began to beat faster and faster. Finally, I burst into tears without knowing why.

Gradually in the following sessions I found the therapist's gaze more and more frightening and one day I saw in his face my mother's eyes. I saw something reproachful and became very angry. I wanted to tear out her eyes and I roared out. Then my body went ice cold and started to sweat and shake. There were times when I experienced panic attacks, but my intellectual understanding of the therapeutic process helped me to cope.

One night I dreamt that I was lying under my bed and saw a woman undressing. I got hard and ejaculated. But when she turned around, I saw that she had no eyes. An indescribable feeling of emptiness and sadness came over me. After that night, my attraction to pornography and contactless sex diminished.

In another dream, I was standing at the exit of a hotel and out came my parents. At first I felt joy and I called out to my mother. She didn't seem to hear me. I called her again and said, "I am your Bruno", but she just walked past me. Then my father arrived and I called him too: "I am Bruno". He looked at me kindly but shook his head and walked on. When I woke up I cried and then I remembered that they had gone away, both of them for a whole year when I was eight years old. They had left me at a very nice orphanage in Vienna. Even today I can't remember whether I felt sad when they left or happy when I saw them again. But the memory of the dream still touches me.

In my therapy I not only became aware of the disappointment I felt towards my parents. I could relive it and could emotionally express my anger. I felt the child's anger, pain and fear of losing these two people whose love I had needed the most. Not only did they disappear from me for a year of my life, but also there was something else, something in my mother's eyes. She did not see me for who I was and made me feel invaded.

Once during a session, the therapist pointed out my shyness and my need to hide this and instead be important and superior, especially towards women. I was annoyed but did not dare to show it.

Instead, my forehead and stomach stiffened, and it hurt. "Make faces," said the therapist, "and kick and scream". I did it hesitantly at first, then with more energy. My roar came from deep in my stomach; my eyes became murderous and surprisingly sharp. After this session, the world looked different. The smells and lights around me became more intense and I once again felt like the little boy I once was and tears began to stream down my cheeks. Then a strange warm feeling spread through my body. I started to run and felt weightless despite my excess weight.

Was this what it was like to be without armor or was it just a small crack that had opened up? I remembered that Reich told me in some of his books that some individuals have such cracks. They can sense certain aspects of life inside and outside themselves that give them surprising insights.

Great artists like van Gogh or scientists like Einstein probably had such cracks in their armor. Even schizophrenics often have surprising insights. However, they lack bodily barriers and the split causes them to experience the movement of orgone energy (emotion) as something foreign, an alien force that takes over their will. Reich noted that in schizophrenics, an orgasmic release can induce a psychotic breakdown.

## **Epilogue**

I am now 83 years old and still working. I have a school-age son who still lives at home. I believe and hope that his mother and I have succeeded well in sparing him to a large extent the burden we ourselves had to take over from our parents. Unfortunately, life is difficult in

a frustrated world where children have partially lost the psychological and social barriers that used to keep destructive impulses created by the frustration of armoring under control. It has been proven that humans and animals can inherit disorders from their parents. Myran A Höfner, who was professor of psychiatry at Albert Einstein's College of Medicine in the 1980s, has found that if you experimentally disrupt the relationship between a female and her young, the animal's sexual and emotional behavior changes. It then takes seven generations for the disruption to subside.

This applies also to human animals; but humans have the ability to create norms and traditions that make social life possible despite frustration and disruption. At the same time, these norms and traditions maintain human armor ad infinitum. We live in a trap. With his Stanford Prison Experiment (1971), psychology professor Philip Zimbardo has shown how inner anger and hatred can break through the armor and act out when our accepted norms and traditions disappear or change. The brutalities that ordinary people can commit during wartime situations are also examples of this.

Psychologist Karen Lyons Ruth (1996), a leading expert on disorganized attachment, found in a 19-year research project that disrupted mother-child attachment in the first year of life is one of the major causes of later psychiatric symptoms. She also found that difficulties in harmonious attachment originated with the mother's own mother.

In this context, I would like to return to Reich's experience of his mother. He describes her as a lively person who had good and loving contact with him. Contrary to what many believe, his mother's sensuality and open attitude to love did not harm little Wilhelm. Instead, it has contributed to an understanding of life. If you want to understand the tragic events in Reich's family, you have to bear in mind that marriage at this time was often based more on convention than on real love. Reich's mother apparently did not find the love she needed in her husband. Daring to seek happiness with another man shows that she had the courage to go against convention. This had disastrous consequences but must have been decisive in Reich's choice of profession.

Reich's research has influenced the thinking of many people, for better or worse. Today there are 140 different forms of body-oriented therapies, including Alexander Lowen's bioenergetics and Arthur Janov's primal scream.

## Reference

Baker E.F. (1967) *Man in the trap*, Macmillan, NY

Henry J.P. And Stephens PM, *Stress, health and the social environment*, Springer Verlag, NY

Höfner MA (1931) *The roots of human behavior*, Freeman &Co, San Francisco.

Sharaf M (1983) *Fury on Earth*, St. Martin's Press, NY

Zimbardo P (1973) *The Stanford Prison Experiment*, Stanford University, [www.prisonexp.org](http://www.prisonexp.org)

Lyons, Ruth,K (1996) *Attachment Relationship Among Children With Aggressive Behavior* Journal of Consulting and Clinical psychology, Vol 64, Notes 64-73

The Journal of Orgonomy, [www.orgonomy.org](http://www.orgonomy.org) The American College of Orgonomy Press, Princeton.