

Watsu in the Shadow of Love: Working with the Fearful

What is fear?

As Watsu practitioners, we come across clients who tense their muscles and lock their joints. They may or may not appear outwardly shy or apprehensive. To work with these clients we need to understand something of fear. Like pain in the physical body, fear is an indicator of an imbalance in the psyche. Where there is a withdrawal and where trust has been lost, there is fear. It is important to pay attention to fear for it distorts our relation to life and shrinks us, contracting our consciousness and limiting our love. The fear becomes more powerful than we are, threatening our existence. It becomes a thing to be avoided, an invisible shadow we dare not gaze upon. Fear belongs to the part of us that is not yet light. The moment comes, however, when we chose to gaze full upon it to fathom its insubstantiality and disintegrate it into illusion.

Addiction and fear

In the unconscious pattern of neurosis, a person recreates an unresolved situation from the past in the hope of healing it. This neurotic struggle is only symbolic, though, without awareness of the feelings denied access to consciousness. These feelings, if experienced, would restore wholeness. In infancy and childhood we locked away the keys to our being. We are a mystery to ourselves only because we have erected an opaque, protective wall around our most vulnerable self. Rather than waking up and dismantling the wall, the neurotic sleepwalks, chasing after substitutes. The reality of psychic pain, with its overlay of guardian fear, is kept at bay with the numbing predictability of addiction in its myriad forms. Addiction driven by fear is the palliative that keeps catastrophic personal truth at bay. Yet, it is precisely this truth that sets us free.

Outer life as inner portrait

Our thoughts, emotions, and beliefs are living energies that, above certain thresholds, eventuate into outer experiences. This can be the conscious process of manifestation, but more often it is unconscious. Thus, we magnetize to ourselves the people, places and events that outpicture our inner landscape, including our fears, blockages, and resistances. Our outer life is a detailed portrait of our inner self, a mirror in which we may behold ourselves. When mindful, we recognize situations that both evoke fears and provide a setting to work through them. The bridge to be crossed awaits us and the challenge survives intact over the decades, hermetically preserved until readiness is attained.

Why are we drawn to fear?

The soul desires freedom. It seeks expansion, but in doing so must face the "narrows". This is the confrontation with self. What the soul seeks, the human personality may rebel against. Yet the Healer within senses that our salvation lies in our terror, that the fear we ideate onto sharks, heights, monsters, or spiders, as examples, actually offers the way to greater awareness. Fear then, represents the edge of growth. The inner Warrior makes the conscious choice to walk toward that which is fearful.

The healing space of Watsu

A good Watsu is one in which fear surfaces and is experienced. And let us be clear that Watsu draws those who fear what it offers: unconditional love, nurturing touch, warm embrace, release, peace and rest. All these may be so poignantly missing in a life, that when tasted ever so fleetingly, they pierce through the psychic armor and crumble defenses. Yet the tower falling into the sea need not be traumatic. Disintegration and rebirth can be gentle. Even as Watsu may trigger the most devastating feelings, it simultaneously gives the safety and space for them. The smooth, onward flowing nature of Watsu allows our partner to "move on" through fears. Let us believe that in the double embrace of a compassionate practitioner and the warm, womb-like water element all things are possible.

The hidden storm

Many in our culture function like an inverted hurricane: an outer calm surrounds and covers over inner turmoil. Only by penetrating the turbulent eye of this storm, do we find the true beauty of authentic identity. Fear manifests in the bodymind as muscular contraction, as physical holding, analogous to the outer calm in the metaphor of the storm. The extreme pole of fear, terror, produces paralysis, a state of frozen non-movement. Holding not only maintains bodily integrity in the face of perceived threat, it also holds in expression. In the melting embrace of Watsu, the defensive holding dissolves, and the feeling maintaining it comes into awareness and may at last be released. The time arrives finally for the troubled soul to unburden, for the impulse toward freedom and fuller life to assert itself.

Watsu in the shadow of love

Our intuition may tell us we hold in our arms a person, into whose world love has not fully entered, a person who stands in the shadow of love, thirsting for it and yet afraid to let it in. There is no better formula than simply to invite the Light into such a session and then to "step aside", to wait with God's patience, with the Love of our Divine Father-

Mother.

Every sincere prayer is answered. I like, "May we open to receive all that is ours to experience this day." I say "we" because my job is to open to the gifts of Spirit, as well, to model that state which I wish to make available for my partner. If I love myself, I can love another; my self-acceptance opens the way to accepting others. To relate sensitively to a partner's fears requires us to be non-violent; that is, gentle, not forcing against resistance; playful perhaps, but always compassionate.

Some practical suggestions

- Screen clients carefully to ascertain if they are truly ready to receive their first Watsu. Ask why it is they wish to have a Watsu. Owing to the high level of physical intimacy of Watsu, it is generally recommended that a would-be receiver has some previous experience with massage. Also, inquire about the receiver's relation to water. Water traumas are never grounds to counterindicate a session. In my experience as a practitioner, water traumas are more often than not unresolved, reflected in some degree of holding. Regardless of how adept the receiver has become swimming, scuba diving or sailing, the fear remains, precisely because the subsequent conquest of water entailed control. Watsu invites the receiver into a different experience, the vulnerable state of surrender.
- The decision to do a session must be mutual and conscious. Explain how physically intimate Watsu is to enable the would-be receiver to make an informed choice for or against receiving.
- Provide photographs and videos to clarify the intimacy and reduce the unfamiliarity inherent in a first session. Ask if there are any movements or positions she would prefer to leave out.
- Using either a questionnaire or asking directly, learn if the would-be receiver is in the care of a therapist and has ever been a victim of abuse.
- In the case of an abuse victim, if we are the opposite gender of the abuser, a session will likely be safer for him/her. If we are the same gender as the abuser, a session may be more challenging, yet with a greater potential for healing the past.
- A victim of sexual abuse may leave her body during a Watsu, as she did when she was abused. It may be in her interest to come to an agreement that you have permission to return her to the present and awareness of her body should this occur. Having her do something physical, such as breathing and open her eyes and putting her feet on the ground, will accomplish this.
- Request emphatically that if, during the session, any boundary is inadvertently crossed or discomfort arises, to please let us know immediately. Tell the receiver she may end the session at any time she wishes, no questions asked, by simply saying, "stop".
- The client's comfort is our prime consideration in conversations in or out of the

pool. They need not be face to face if eye contact is awkward for her. Leaning side by side against the wall, for example, may be more comfortable in this case. Together you face in the same direction, contemplating what is to come. Let the distance between you be right. A relaxed body posture and sinking a bit lower than the client can also put her at ease.

- Before the session, ask permission to set up a signaling system: lightly tapping a body part will signify some holding or helping is going on and that partner can relax it and let it go.
- Ask the receiver if anything is going on for her she needs to share--any qualms or misgivings.
- Ask the receiver if she would like to start. Making this choice is empowering for her.
- Give the receiver permission to close the eyes in the opening if she appears to be uncomfortable.
- Instead of standing facing each other to start, lean back against the pool wall and have the receiver lean back against us, breathing together. In this case, begin supporting the receiver in Under Head Position.
- Notice if partner's arm goes back in front of us on the pick up, in which case, leave it there.
- Begin in Under Head Position or Free Float. Both impose less intimate touch than First Position. Later we may try moving into First.
- If the knees are locked straight, raise partner's ears out of the water, and addressing her by name, ask "May I bend your knees?" or "Would you like to bend your knees?" or "Shall we try a position with the knees bent?" or "Would you be more comfortable with your knees bent?"
- If the knees are locked straight, receivers will more often let one knee bend than both. Try "fluffing" the thigh and calf muscles, playfully making tiny circles with the knee, then bending it and releasing it to release holding patterns.
- Try rolling partner outward in First, Under Shoulder or Free Float to bend the knee or knees. This is less intimate and may feel safer.
- If partner is holding her head up out of the water, address her by name and ask, "Would you like to let your head lie back in the water?" If we are having difficulty holding her up, we tell her so.
- A partner who remains with eyes open, hyper-vigilant, should not be pressured to close her eyes.
- Watsu slowly. Slower tempi are less threatening as they allow more processing time for potentially frightening newness. Above all, we wish to *avoid shocks* and surprises.
- Notice how partner reacts to "indicator moves" such as Near Leg Rotation, Hip Rock, and Arm-Leg Rock. Assess whether to place the hand on the chest in Lengthening Spine, or to do Near Leg Over and the Open Saddle.

- If we're not sure about whether a position is appropriate, ask, "Shall we try this position with your leg over my neck? If you are uncomfortable we can move out of it."
- If partner lets go of a joint then tenses it up again, that's okay. Transiting back and forth across a holding pattern can be constructive. It's a place where she can gain awareness of the holding through repetition.
- When feelings arise, drop the sequence and pay more attention to what's happening with the person, perhaps holding, rocking, massaging lightly and giving reminders to breathe. Let the flow subside to a completely non-distracting level. Remain reassuringly present. Don't assume a client will want to finish a session after an emotional release. Once the feelings appear to pass, ask, "Would you like to continue or to stop?"

A Quick Guide to Levels of Intimacy

- 1.Contact is more intimate than no contact.
- 2.The receiver's arm behind the giver's back is more intimate than when it is free.
- 3.The receiver's body rolled in toward the giver is more intimate than when it is supine or rolled away.
- 4.Bending two legs is more intimate than bending one leg.
- 5.Opening the legs is more intimate than when they remain together.
- 6.Cheek to cheek is more intimate than simply supporting the head on the shoulder.
- 7.Touching the receiver's heart, hara, buttocks and upper thighs is intimate.

Afterword

A Watsu with a fearful client requires more sensitivity, patience, and compassion than usual; the small degree of movement permitted may feel constricting to us and results are not always evident. The receiver may have made an internal movement, though, that if continued over the course of another five, ten or twenty sessions, would result in a physical shift. If there is a goal in Watsu it is expanded awareness, rather than change. Awareness precedes change. One client told me before her session, "I know how to relax." Her body remained tense throughout the session. When it was over, I felt my responsibility to her was simply to suggest that possibly there was a deeper level of surrender awaiting her. I see my role as being to create the space, hold open the door and wait desirelessly.

What can be learned from working with the obviously fearful? They serve as a mirror, reminding us to ask ourselves, in what areas of my life am I blocked and afraid? Have I given my life fully to Spirit? Where am I a slow learner? Is there any step in my life I hesitate to take?.

We can learn respect for the limitations of others and thereby offer ourselves acceptance of our own limits. How else shall they fall away except we cease to judge ourselves in others? A favorite lyric from Pink Floyd: "Nobody knows where you are, how near or how far..." What minuscule distance are we advanced beyond these brothers and sisters in the eons long ascent to God? And do we know that, even, with certainty?