

Listening to the Breath of Life: The Deep Work of Craniosacral Therapy

Just over 100 years ago William Sutherland, in his last year of studies to become a Doctor of Osteopathy, walked through the halls of the School of Osteopathy in Kirksville, Missouri. Suddenly he felt directed to the disarticulated cranial bones he had passed many times without further notice. He felt transfixed by the articulation of the Sphenoid and the Temporal bone: "Then, like a blinding flash of light, came the thought: "Beveled, like the gills of a fish, and indicating articular mobility for respiratory mechanism." A man who had never heard inner voices before, was struck by this thought and spent the rest of his life exploring the movement of the bones of the skull.

Sutherland did extensive studies and research, first on himself and then on his clients. He linked the movement of the bones at their sutures to the membrane system inside the skull and to the tidal flow of the cerebral spinal fluid (CSF). This fluid is a viscous liquid that surrounds the central nervous system that consists of the brain and the spinal cord, and supplies this system with nutrients and cleanses it of waste. Using a leather football helmet to strap down individual cranial bones one at a time, he realized that these inflicted restrictions changed his personality and his sense of well-being. The force of the helmet inhibited the movement of an individual cranial bone and thus decreased the space for the free flow of the CSF. His clients had similar restrictions in movement of their cranial bones, which were caused by physical and/or emotional traumas. Sutherland found effective ways to work with these restrictions, focusing on the bones and the membrane system to increase the flow of the CSF. His clients enjoyed tremendous results from his treatments. In the 1930s Sutherland presented his findings and treatment work to a very doubtful medical establishment, which did not acknowledge any movement of the bones of the skull. And he began to teach to an increasing number of interested osteopaths until his death in 1954. Sutherland's theory and treatment techniques continue to be studied in-depth and then expanded by other osteopaths and health care professionals since, and have found their way out of the profession of osteopathy into the bodywork community as a whole. Today this work is most commonly known as cranial work or cranio-sacral therapy. It is widely acknowledged as a very powerful and beneficial therapy, as many patients have benefited from it tremendously.

Shortly before his death, Sutherland discovered a force from within the cerebral spinal fluid that he called "The Breath of Life". Others call this "Breath of Life" the soul, the genius, the daimon. This discovery moved his work far beyond the physical approach into the realms of psyche and soul. He realized that the cerebral spinal fluid was the most physical manifestation of the soul.

When I began to include the "breath of life" into my awareness while doing cranial treatments I found my life's. This work resonates most deeply with me. When I work with the awareness of the "breath of life" it seemed as if my clients release a deep sigh as if arriving home at last. They would then go to work on their core issues which brings them the life changing results they had hoped for. Cranial work, when it is done including the "breath of life", is one of the subtlest yet powerful therapies and addresses the whole person.

Before I go into the different aspects that are addressed with cranial work, the body, the psyche and the soul, I would like to introduce the personal skills one needs to bring to this work. They are: deep listening and inot knowingî. These two abilities are not learned but rather developed.

One needs to develop and cultivate inner stillness to be able to deeply listen. Like in a conversation with a friend, if my mind is preoccupied with what I want to say next, or what I need to get at the grocery store, I am unable to hear what my friend wants to communicate. In cranial work my mind needs to be quiet and present so that I can listen with my hands, my ears, and most crucially with my heart. I need to have the ability to come back to quiet when a thought distracts my present awareness. With a quiet mind I can be present, listen, and bear witness to what is being expressed, verbally and nonverbally, and realize what needs to be addressed and happen. In this way I can hear the whispers and do not need to wait for the screams. I have sat in meditation for many years before I did cranial work. When I started this work, I realized that I was harvesting the fruits of the long hours of meditation. There are many ways to develop inner stillness: for instance in deep resonance with nature or in movement.

Then there needs to be willingness to let go of any agenda, of a game plan, or a fixed set of techniques, to be open to the uniqueness of each client. I call this the place of inot knowingî. When I touch a client I do not know what I will find, I do not know what he/she needs, I do not know how they express health, and I do not know what needs to happen for them to feel more whole. Again, as in a conversation with a friend, if I think I know what she is saying before she opens her mouth, I am unlikely to really hear what she is communicating, let alone what she is saying in between the lines. If I am able to stay in a place of not knowing, if I am able to truly let go of judgment, expectations and ideas, then I can hold a space for my client to express whatever needs to be expressed, verbally and nonverbally. This is difficult in a culture where education is based on knowledge and not on discovery and where healing is understood as an elimination of symptoms and not as a process that leads to wholeness. At first sight this place of not knowing might be a scary one. But as life itself has been my teacher in this, I learned to trust that I am able to respond to an unknown situation rather than having to hold on to an agenda, to techniques I learned and that might not be appropriate to the current situation. But a place of discovery, of inot knowingî releases me from the pressure to perform, to fix, or to cure ñ impossible tasks anyway. Our clients are so used to giving up the search for their own voice to follow the advice of a professional. Yet they are deeply empowered when they discover their own individual deep, inner knowing and by their own innate ability to heal themselves.

Being open and accepting a place of inot knowingî, and the ability to be still in order to listen does not give me permission to lack in my learning and studying. The more knowledge I bring to the work the less I need to hold on to it, and the easier it is to be in discovery mode and do the right thing at the right time. This is where healing work becomes art. But first extensive study of the whole human being, the body, the psyche and the soul, needs to happen.

The Body: The body is the most material manifestation of a human being. The first thing to learn in cranial work is to feel the cranial rhythm. This tidal movement, found in the cerebral spinal fluid is an ancient rhythmic ebb and flow, with deep stillness in between. The movement affects the whole body, not just the bones of the skull, the spine or the sacrum, its container. The tidal waves of the fluid ripple through every cell of the body affecting every organ and limb, and can be felt on any part of the body. Likewise, the flow of the cerebral spinal fluid is affected not only because of restrictions at the sutures of the skull, but also by such conditions as muscle tension, enlarged blood vessels, and inflamed nerves or emotional states like anxiety, excitement, relaxation. One can listen to this wave for a long time, and do good work by just doing that.

Yet life-long studies of anatomy, physiology and pathology are needed in order to do this work masterfully. For example, the Sphenoid, called the bone, by Sutherland, is a beautiful structure that goes from one temple to the other, from the back of the mouth to the eye sockets. This bone's anatomy is so intricate it needs to be looked at over and over again to be understood. Then its connection to other bones through sutures and joints, through muscles and membranes become fascinations as do its relationship to the cranial nerves that run through and over it. The sphenoid's influence on the endocrine system is an important consideration because the pituitary gland is nestled in the bone. The more I know about anatomy, physiology and pathology, the better I can focus on the various structures and listen. By listening with inner stillness, by putting my fingers and my intention precisely on these structures, they start guiding me in the treatment, expressing their discomfort, their compression or their happiness. They will also tell me what they need. And in my silent, skillful accepting, the structures can find optimal positioning and functioning. This is not about manipulation because I, the practitioner, know what is best, this is about allowing the body to find its own expression and its own fluid movement. Who would want to be manipulated, anyway?

Sutherland and others have developed techniques to work with the cranial bones, the sacrum, the connecting structures between these two and other related tissues in order to optimize the flow of the CSF. As the cranial bones are delicate and movements subtle, the correct positioning of my hands and fingers, as well as the weight I place on these bones, are crucial. The ability to visualize structures like the pituitary gland makes it possible to work with them even when they cannot be touched directly. Throughout a treatment I need to have full awareness on what I am doing and what my intentions are. There are powerful techniques that are easy to learn and simple to apply. There are also more demanding, three-dimensional techniques that deal with more complex physical issues. And then there is intention, an even more potent tool. I need to develop the ability to direct my intention and monitor its force. Once I have learned and mastered the techniques, but only then, can I let go of their limitations and start improvising, just like any artist. Then, the possibilities in this truly amazing form of therapy become as vast as the sky.

Many trainings in this form of therapy address mainly the physical aspect of this work. It is all important to learn this aspect thoroughly and well. But: for a carpenter the most

often used tool might be a hammer, yet he needs many more tools to do a job thoroughly and well. And so have I, my students and my clients come to realize that the most profound healing is done when we can move beyond the physical.

The Psyche: The psyche deals with our emotions. To separate the body from the psyche is artificial. There is an emotional component to every physical experience, problem or trauma. When emotional responses to experiences cannot be expressed in a healthy way when they arise, they get stored in the tissues of the body, the muscles, bones and organs. Working with the breath of life within the cerebral spinal fluid, the body relaxes, the brain activities slow down and the ego with its defense mechanisms gets out of the way. When we are attentively listening to the tissues, the stored emotions will surface. This is a chance to recognize the emotions, process and release them and then integrate them into our lives. As health care professionals we are trained to work with the body, and often feel inadequate or scared to deal with our clients' emotions. But when we start listening to the body it will not only tell us about the physical problems, but of the pain of the psyche too. Sometimes the release of the physical pain does not come through the body, but through remembering the injury, the original hurt, that has happened to the psyche. The best way to learn about the emotions is to study and become familiar with one's own psyche, to discover all the emotions in one self, to discover places of fear, of anger, frustration, anguish and ecstasy. Personally I have an educational background in counseling and worked as a counselor for many years. But most helpful in my development as a healer has been, and still is, the journeys to the bottom and the abyss of my own psyche, my own pain and the discovery that this is not all that I am. Now I can fearlessly travel with my clients, be present and compassionate when they venture out to explore their emotions and their pain. My students in becoming skillful cranial practitioners, find it very helpful to receive sessions to get to know themselves deeply and experience how this powerful work touches one on many different levels.

The Soul: The place of the soul is where we feel at peace, where there is no blame and no guilt, no game, where a person experiences his or her life as meaningful, where everything makes sense, a place of innocence, of wonder and curiosity. It is where we find ourselves in the right place at the right time, where personal life experiences are connected to each other and where my experiences are connected to yours and to the world. It is beyond analytical understanding and speaks in stories ñ lyrical, archetypal, non-linear and symbolic. It is almost impossible to find the voice of the soul while our egos are involved in busy every day chatter of survival and security. The techniques of cranial work offer the possibility to slow down the brain activity far enough so that we are able to let go of the ego's concern. In this somewhat altered state of consciousness, in a safe environment and with someone that listens and bears witness, the soul will come forth. And that is where complete healing is taking place.

Traditional healers and doctors of all cultures have worked with the soul. One of the most ancient tools is laying on hands, others are story telling, use of symbols, of poetry, of rituals. Laying on hands is part of cranial work. Expanding my skills by learning poetry, story telling and so forth, I learn the language of the soul and develop skills to converse with it. Experiencing the effects of these tools is the most potent way to learn about my

own soul. This enables me to recognize the voice of the client's soul. It also helps me realize how tender and vulnerable I become, when I open up in this profound way. This will help me be most attentive and careful with my clients

To study and learn all this might seem like a tall order. And it is true, this healing modality cannot be mastered by taking a weekend continuing education workshop. Yet the longest journey starts with one little step. This first step can provoke profound changes in a health care practitioner, can change one's practice, as it is very liberating to let go of fixing and curing. This work is not about a set of techniques to be applied, but about being present in the moment, responding to the moment and inviting change. Then my curiosity is triggered and it becomes natural to keep learning, developing and studying.

Ursula Popp, April 2002