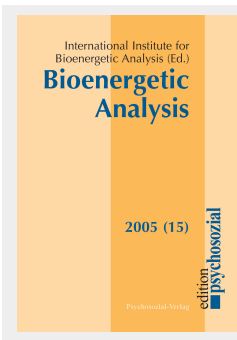


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Book Review of: Lowen, A. (2004) (Ed. Glazer, R.). Honoring the Body, The Autobiography of Alexander Lowen



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Review of »Honoring the Body – the Autobiography of Alexander Lowen«

Philip M. Helfaer

»The fulfillment that life and therapy offer is the ability to be fully true to one's self. That self for me is the bodily self, the only self we will ever know. Trust it, love it and be true to yourself« (Lowen 2004, p. 243).

For as long as I've known him, he has been »Al« for nearly everybody who meets him. He has a simplicity, directness, and lack of pretension that invites us to address him in the personal form. From this man who has been so important to the Bioenergetic community and so significant in many of our lives, we now have his autobiography. It is essential reading for anyone who practices Bioenergetic Analysis, and it is a significant and useful contribution for anyone interested in the field.

Besides Dr. Lowen, we have Robert Glazer to thank for its publication. He helped Al complete the book, edited and published it. I saw a version of the manuscript prior to Glazer's collaboration on the project, and I can attest that the material in the manuscript I read corresponds in content, style, and tone with the material in the published book. The outcome is an excellently developed, well organized whole. As with all of Lowen's writing, it can be read with, perhaps, deceptive ease.

I take the publication of his autobiography as a celebration of his life, and reviewing it, for me, is an honoring of the man. Alexander Lowen is one of those fortunate men whose life and work touched and benefited many other people. He is therapist, mentor, teacher, writer, and developer of Bioenergetic Analysis. He was the student of Wilhelm Reich who brought Reich's work back to earth and made it widely available in the form of a treatment modality, a view of the human condition, an organization, and a training program. In *Honoring the Body*, Lowen speaks with unvarnished honesty about how he sees his own shortcomings. His accomplishment, regardless, is impressive and praiseworthy.

There is one dominant feature of the book that will stand out for every reader. This story of his life is the story of the development of Bioenergetic

Analysis. Lowen was totally dedicated to his work. His Introduction is framed by two sentences.

»The underlying purpose of Bioenergetic Analysis has always been to heal the mind-body split. ... I've dedicated my life to the pursuit of healing my own mind-body split and the pleasure of the life of the body« (pp. 7, 10).

These two sentences are indicative of the way in which his personal story and Bioenergetics are intertwined. The personal background of Part One leads up to the meeting with Reich. What follows is his therapy with Reich, and his finding himself through the affiliation with Reich and Reich's work. From here, he goes on to become a Reichian therapist and then to found Bioenergetic Analysis. Subsequent sections revolve around an account of his books, the basics of Bioenergetics, and the development of the International Institute for Bioenergetic Analysis. Personal crisis always goes hand in hand with a crisis in his conception of Bioenergetics and a subsequent deepening of that conception.

The story of his own healing is a sub-theme. There are other sub-themes as well, the most important of which, of course, is the tender and touching story of his courting, marrying, and subsequent life with his beloved wife, Leslie. The happiest years of his life, he says, were those just after their marriage when they were living in Greenwich Village, New York City. This was before medical school and before Bioenergetics.

After returning from medical school in Switzerland, work dominated his life, as it did for Reich. He did better than Reich, however, even in the years when Bioenergetics was a growing field, in maintaining his capacity for pleasure and making time for it. Skiing, sailing, and his beach house were enjoyments and passions. He also took pleasure in travels, especially when Leslie accompanied him. He enjoyed workshops in which a camaraderie developed in a setting of natural beauty where there was simple good food, local music, and dancing.

More than simply work, however, a deeply felt mission dominated Lowen's life, above and beyond everything else.¹ He felt driven by it. He

¹ See pages 92, 154, 208, 217.

saw that it left him in conflict with colleagues. He also deeply believed in it. At the same time, again, he could self-critically associate his sense of mission with what he perceived as his ›narcissism«. Under this heading he included his wish for fame. Further, he says,

»I have felt that I absorbed some of his (Reich's) messianic feeling. (...)

And yet I could always justify my position. Wasn't this that I was doing an important contribution to mankind? Yes, and I still believe so« (p. 92, p. 208).

As much as he believed in it, he was never quite comfortable with his mission. He ties it in to his struggles in other ways. »I felt helpless, and yet I couldn't give up my struggle. I couldn't accept the idea of failure« (p. 208). He says that at age sixty-six he began his struggle to get free and have more peace and joy (p. 208), but it was almost twenty years later before he was able to resign as director of the Institute he had founded (p. 210). Then, »I felt like a free person«.

I see here a tragic aspect to Lowen's character. He seems never to have separated out his sense of mission as a valid and good part of himself from other aspects of himself, ›narcissism«, about which he was very self-critical. Surely, it is possible to have a mission one strongly believes in without it being an expression of narcissism.

For those of us for whom Al has been an important figure in our lives, any reading of his autobiography will be colored by our own autobiographies. I, myself, found the story and the voice very familiar – up to a point. In *Honoring the Body*, Lowen tells of his life struggles, both personal and as founder and developer of Bioenergetic Analysis. In reading about these, I hear another voice, one that is not so familiar, running along side of the more familiar one. This is the voice of insecurity and self-criticism, at times a voice verging into despair, at times expressed in painful somatic symptoms. It is the voice emerging out of crisis and a sense of failure. It is the voice longing for freedom, peace, and joy.

From this voice I gained insight into my own life journey and a deeper understanding of Bioenergetics, and I believe others may too. In addition, in listening to this voice, I found help with a basic set of questions. What does Lowen mean by ›the mind-body split«, and how does he himself experience

it? How have these experiences influenced the development of Bioenergetic Analysis? I approached *Honoring the Body* with these questions.

Within *Honoring the Body* there are several stories. There is the remarkable American story of the child of immigrant parents who makes good by dint of wits, long hard work, and determination. There is the story of the lonely child of neurotic, unhappy parents, who becomes the sexually tormented adolescent and youth, who fights his way toward health, love, and a life devoted to helping others along the same path. There is the story of the young man whose ›identity moratorium‹ lasts into his early thirties who finds a trusted, powerful mentor. The mentor accepts the young man into his fold and provides the environment and rites of passage from which the young man emerges to find his own masculinity, adulthood, and identity. He then moves out into the world to work, love, marry and found his own family, personal and professional. There is the story of the ›empire builder‹, whose efforts, conflicts, and struggles cost himself considerably. There is the story of the intellectual with a remarkable, constant outpouring of books and articles over many years, all deeply probing »the nature of the human condition«, as he would call it. There is, of course, a story of love and romance, his marriage to the lovely woman he »had to marry«. Finally, there is the story of the seeker whose lifetime is guided by a spiritual practice. His quest is for healing, fulfillment, and real joy. His method is the devoted exploration of the energy of the body and of grounding. Overall, here is a story of a long life, well lived, and lived to the full.

Then, there is the story of his relationship with his mother. She seems to have been a terribly frightened, anxious person, quite lost, alone, without a secure connection to her husband, without much sense of self, looking to her son for connection and security. Her effect on her son's, Alexander's, development left him with life-long struggles. Out of his mother's impact on his development emerges much of the feeling and meaning that went into Lowen's sense of the mind-body split. He shares a brilliant and painfully incisive account.

»Most of my life I have worked to restore the body to the central position in the hierarchy of the personality. It is the ground of our being and the basis for our sexuality. Why did I not make my position clear when I created the Bioenergetic approach to the understanding and treatment of emotional problems?

The answer lies in my personality structure, which is split. My identification with my body has been on the level of survival and pleasure, whereas my identification with my mind was on the basis of success and superiority. It was only on the level of my intellectual ability that I could prove that I was as good, if not better than others. This need to prove my superiority stemmed from a deep feeling of humiliation associated with my bodily functions and from my identification with my mother in her contempt for the body. Although the therapy with Reich lessened this identification with my mother, it did not ground me enough in the body. The reason for this was very simple but not clear at the time. Reich was also a thinker, albeit a great one who used his intellectual ability to overcome his own deep feelings of inferiority and humiliation relative to his father and older (sic) brother. My egotism was big (»I want to be famous«). His egotism was even bigger. He was a ›great man‹. (...) (M)y egotism got in the way of developing Bioenergetics as a solid foundation for understanding the human dilemma« (p. 217).

Underlying his long career is his life-long struggle to get free of a very destructive relationship with his mother. Her negative, even cruel, way of relating to her son around bodily functions and his masculinity left him with a deep bodily sense of shame and humiliation. At the same time, his own real experience showed him that his body is his only source of well-being, comfort, and pleasure. Framing his split in stark, simple, bold terms – body versus mind – enabled him to grapple with the archetypal mother and emerge with his life.

Fortunately, he was intellectually gifted, and he used his gifts to move through his education with ease. He became aware of his use of his intellect in his adaptation, his effort to get along despite fear, insecurity, aloneness, lack of a strong sense of self, and humiliation. If he was driven in his efforts, he can hardly be blamed. His fight for survival was deadly serious. Fortunately, again, he had the energy to carry it off.

His judgment of himself in the lines above is harsh, even merciless. Elsewhere, he refers to the ›tyrannical ego‹, the ego we are ›slaves‹ to, the ego that is a ›dictator‹, all of which might better be termed an ›ego-ideal‹ in the service of a ›super-ego‹ (p. 128).

What Alexander, that mother's son, never had, was an empathic ear for the humiliation and a compassionate interpretation of ›superiority‹ as the

natural effort to rise above humiliation. Thus he came to distrust the intellect, as he felt it becomes a tool to distance from the body. However, ›rising above‹ is the natural energetic adaptive response to humiliation, charging the brain is a result. The ›criminal‹ is not the brain, it is the original ›insult‹. It is very difficult to let down from such injuries, especially on one's own, and it is probably a life-long process even under the best of circumstances. So it is that Lowen returns again and again to his quest to be grounded, to connect to the original mother, Mother Earth, as the only support, compensation, and cure available for the destruction wrought by his mother.

At age twenty-eight, Lowen faced a crisis which he met in a characteristic way (p. 30). He realized he was depressed. He resolved the depression by doing exercises after work. He wanted more than ever to find a way to make a living through being in his body. He felt his split. He could be ›special‹ through his intellect (p. 29), but only through his body could he find pleasure and a good feeling. Al had sought out physical activities, sports and games of all kinds, as his refuge and salvation from the time he was a child, playing in the streets of Harlem in New York City, then a largely Jewish community. From five to fifteen, »the street was the center of my life« (p. 19). In high school and college there were handball and basketball, later tennis and skiing. He was an athletics coach for adult summer camps during his twenties. The impression of his sheer physical energy and activity is strong. His experience with Reich confirmed his own instincts and predilections. Relief from our insecurities, anxieties, and neurotic conflicts can be found through the body, specifically, as he learned in his experience with Reich, freeing the energy of the body. The ›mind‹ may mean living the life of the intellect, but this is not masculine, and it is an effort at superiority, an effort to realize the ego values of a culture divorced from nature and the body. For Lowen, these remain deeply held convictions. Throughout *Honoring the Body* Lowen refers to a deeply felt insecurity, a wish to build the foundation for a stronger sense of self, the longing to be freed from sexual shame and torment, and the quest for a stronger sense of masculinity and the ability to love. These needs seemed to have been remarkably well fulfilled in his therapy with Reich. I found one of the most touching passages in the book to be this tribute to Wilhelm Reich.

»So much of the power of Reich's therapy was in the strength of his personality and the strength of his being. Reich was brilliant and knew his ideas were right. I drew energy from Reich, and his courage and his energy gave me the trust to face the sexual repression and shame that I had been raised with. In the two and a half years of therapy I did with Reich, I was able to feel and surrender to my body in a way I had not known was possible. Those experiences saved my life and gave me the foundation for doing therapy. I will always remain grateful for the experiences I had with Reich.

(...) I had been a very self-conscious young man, ashamed of my background and unable to find a place in the world. Meeting Reich and becoming involved with his work changed my outlook. I had needed to build a more solid base in my personality that could support a stronger sense of self. I had needed to grow and to become more of a man. Reich had changed my life. (...) I had achieved the sexual potency that I had longed for« (pp. 42–3).

Until I read *Honoring the Body*, I never heard Al so much as hint at any shortcomings in Reich the man or the therapist. At the same time, however, he did indicate shortcomings in his own therapy with Reich: not enough character Analysis and not enough work with the deep muscular tensions. Lowen set out to develop a therapy that would take care of those shortcomings. In fact, he repeatedly acknowledges discovering that he failed to do so, and he always attributes that failure to a failure in his own development.

In *Honoring the Body* we read Lowen's account of the shortcomings in Reich's own personality and character that limited the therapy Reich was able to offer. There was not only »the great man issue« and the egotistical effort to overcome humiliation on Reich's part.

»Reich's tragedy was that he wasn't oriented toward grounding. Literally his work was toward the Cosmos. His body was heavy, puffed up, with a big chest. He was a smoker. Unfortunately, he died of a heart attack« (p. 41).

In these observations about Reich, we gain more insight into the significance and origins of Lowen's work with grounding. Bring Reich's work back to earth – Mother Earth. Further, as the euphoria he felt upon finishing his therapy with Reich declined (something experienced by many of Reich's patients), so emerged the necessity of standing on one's own two feet.

»I realized it was one thing to feel strong and secure when one is under the guidance and protection of a powerful personality like Reich's, but quite another situation when one has to stand alone on his own two feet« (p. 43).

Once on his own, Lowen experienced within himself a loss of the sense of security and strength he had experienced while with Reich. This experience was one of the motivations for the development of his own work. In addition, I feel these significant remarks cast some light on his relationship with his father. A further consideration of his relationship with his mother will help illuminate this.

I glimpsed the force of her destructiveness to a child from a conversation with Al during a recent visit. I believe he would not mind my sharing the story. It reveals a tender and strong side of him. The story has to do with his younger sister. His mother was very destructive to her, he said. Eventually, at a time of youthful crisis, Al intervened and got her to Reich. He said that she didn't have many sessions with him, »but it was enough«, and she went on to live her life.

What was touching to me was the way he talked about his sister in the most tender, accepting, protective, and sensitive terms. I had the impression that he appreciated in her a sensitivity, vulnerability, and an unarmored state similar to a side of himself that he had to guard. He could allow in her an utter lack of worldly accomplishment that he could not allow for himself. He expressed an empathy for her that he rarely grants himself. By contrast, I sensed the way in which he has been very self-critical, very hard on himself, not just driven, but always expecting great accomplishments of himself.

In this same conversation, I asked him about his father. I gathered the same impression that is suggested in his autobiography. That after childhood, his father was hardly an influence in his life. There is no indication that he supported or was even involved in his son's development as a youth and young man.

Lowen tells us that his mother's humiliation and strange ways of relating to him bodily and sexually made him pull up. We can see, too, that his father's absence and passivity left him without the support and masculine identification that might have made him less susceptible to his mother's influence, allowing him to let back down. His therapy with Reich, he tells

us, lessened his identification with his mother, but not enough. Since Reich, his therapist, hadn't resolved his own humiliation, Alexander was once again left without the necessary masculine support, just as he had been by his father.

Despite this repetition, he moved on in his life. Honesty, energy, a creative use of his mind, on the one hand, and an absence of negativity on the other, allowed him to make of his loss of his sense of security the motivation to develop the healing path he needed, using what he had acquired with Reich.

Through *Honoring the Body*, I gained a deeper appreciation and understanding of grounding and energy. I found answers to my original questions regarding Lowen's views and experiences of the mind-body split. I was particularly interested in, and learned from, what Lowen has to say in his autobiography regarding Bioenergetic therapy itself.

I will start with a striking utterance that appears to reveal a dilemma or paradox at the core of Bioenergetic therapy. »Bioenergetic therapy does not offer treatment for emotional problems« (p. 221).

This utterance shocks the mind like a zen koan. After one gets over the shock and resists the temptation not to take it seriously, I found some enlightenment. I believe he means what he says and that what he says is deeply meaningful.

He goes on to say,

»Therapy is a self-healing process in which the therapist is a guide and facilitator. But how good a guide he is depends on his understanding of the human condition and the problems that develop when the culture, acting through the family, imposes conditions and restraints on the natural development of the human personality. Since the therapist, like every member of society has struggled with and suffered from the conflicts that arise in the interaction of culture and nature, his value as a guide depends on how much he understands the human condition and how well he has dealt with the personal traumas he has suffered growing up« (p. 221).

This passage, as I read it, is an expression of Lowen's deep faith. He has faith in the body and the healing power of the natural, energetic processes of the

body. The therapist should not be ›treating‹ the patient's ›emotional problems‹, therapy in the usual sense. The therapist has a more profound task. The therapist needs to ›under-stand‹ the human condition. This is not a mental task. It means to have worked with breathing, grounding, and feeling, developing and deepening as fully as possible the pulsatory grounding wave. It means to live through whatever frightening and terrible experiences emerge and to understand them. Bioenergetic therapy is the freeing, deepening, and strengthening of that pulsatory wave. As it develops, nature takes its course and healing occurs. Nature is the Healer, not the therapist.

There is another striking aspect of this statement. Lowen did not think of himself as a revolutionary, as Reich thought of himself. However, in this passage, Lowen clearly reveals the degree to which he stands outside of culture and is a critic of culture. Just as there is a stark contrast between body and mind, so there is a stark, embattled contrast and conflict between nature and culture in the human condition.

Understanding the human condition is the understanding of the impact of culture on the biology of the organism »acting through the family«. *Fear of Life*, »my most important book«, is not primarily a discussion of the psychodynamics of the Oedipus complex. It is precisely about the impact of modern culture acting through the family on the individual. How do we understand the process of Bioenergetic therapy and the role of the therapist from these considerations? In contrast with Reich, Lowen reveals that there were several periods of crisis for him when he realized that the Bioenergetic therapy he was practicing was not bringing the desired results.

»After working with these exercises for many years, I had to face the fact that the therapy I was doing was not really making the changes required in patients that would help them feel more fulfilled. (...) I never really failed in any situation that was important to me. (...) I became increasingly aware that I was failing in both my marriage and in my work as a therapist (p 142). (...) The issue was still grounding, but I needed a technique that would help me break through the shock state« (pp. 142–143).²

He is referring to 1990, age eighty. In his work as a therapist and in his work on himself, Lowen always returns to deepening grounding and the energetic pulsation. At this particular point Lowen introduced the technique of working

with the golf ball and a deeper understanding of the energetic significance of the ball of the foot. His development of the grounding exercises did not end there, either.

These acknowledgments take moral courage. This is self-critical awareness. He makes it perfectly clear that he feels that the failure of his therapeutic work and of Bioenergetics generally is a direct result of his own deficiencies, and he takes full responsibility for those deficiencies, whatever their origin. It is characteristic of Lowen's style – both as a man and as a writer – that he expresses himself with simplicity, frankness, and honesty. It is not in his repertoire to try to find a more »sophisticated« form of expression that will guard him against possible criticism.

The most dramatic of these acknowledgments and his most direct statement of the implications for Bioenergetic therapy is introduced with the remark, »In the course of my pursuit of pleasure, I did not see how ungrounded I had become« (p. 228). He is not talking here, of course, about sybaritic pleasures. He is referring to the pleasure he found, for example, in his Greek workshops and his becoming more widely known. »Was Bioenergetics doing the job it promised« (p. 228)? He goes on to say that the Bioenergetic exercises, as practiced in the workshops, for example, help people feel better, but they do not change character structure. Here he explicitly states what he believes the therapeutic task to be. »The therapeutic approach aims at helping a patient surrender his defensive position« (p. 229).

What follows this is a remarkable discussion of fear and death from an energetic point of view to which I commend the reader.

How is a patient to be helped in gaining the understanding of his/her fear of death that will allow him/her to relinquish the defensive position? As in all his books, in *Honoring the Body* Lowen refers to the »two legs« (p. 147) of Bioenergetic Analysis, the energetic body work and the psychological work. In practice, Lowen expressed little faith in the latter as a therapeutic tool, and in his practice he focused on working with the body. Only by the fall, usually terrifying, from the ego into the body, will the individual finally be able to relinquish a defensive position. This route means accepting mortality, human limitedness, and the self as body (pp. 225, 229).

² See also pages 208, 210.

There is another element of therapy to which Lowen devotes attention in *Honoring the Body*. The Bioenergetic path is through the life of the body, and the life of the body is expressed in feeling. Bioenergetic exercises are meant to bring the body alive (pp. 119-20), not to make it perform or look better. Coming alive, that is working with energy, means feeling. Feelings, especially negative ones, are the basis for resistance. In addition, we fear being overwhelmed by aliveness.

Lowen mentions despair, fear, anxiety, sadness, as feelings we don't want to feel. We don't want to feel these, so we don't want to do the work and we don't want to change. »It has been hard for me to accept that most people do not want to feel more« (p. 119).

Here is how I see some of the implications of the remarks on Bioenergetic therapy. In addition to the feelings just mentioned, there are other kinds of feelings we don't want to feel. People naturally organize in defense against insecurity, humiliation, and sexual ruination, aspects of Lowen's own personality, which he shares in all humility. Deficits in the sense of self can also be experienced in even more severe forms as profound aloneness, turmoil, unreality, and a fragmented negative identity. These are not simply ›feelings‹, either. They are complex states of the self.

Feelings, in therapy, as often as not, are affective states and states of the self, body memories, and repetitions that were part of or emerged out of early relationships. Those states are very often utterly unbearable. Further, such affective states are the fuel, the motivation, and the underlying reasons for the defensive position; they drive adaptation. Giving up control and allowing the defensive position to break down as the necessary condition for allowing the free flow of energy (p. 221) requires experiencing such terrible states. Therapeutic healing means living these through with the support of the therapist, as Lowen clearly indicates, and reintegrating the emerging states as the energy is freed. Lowen mentions one such episode, remembering his experiences with his mother in his bout with enlarged prostate (p.193).

›Letting go‹ of a deep-seated adaptation which has evolved into an identity is a long, complex process. Thus, with every crisis, Lowen describes how he returned to working with his feet and grounding, each time finding a deeper experience of grounding and another useful technique for making the grounding exercises more effective. As his students

we are left with this deep exploration and an understanding of the energetic processes of the body that is unique.

The way out is down, and the way down is through the pelvis, and this means there is no escape from feeling the terrible states of the self that are themselves the deepest threats to the sense of the self. »It took me fifteen more years to resolve this problem in my own personality« (p. 120), which takes him to age eighty-three.³

Lowen persists in his explorations and development to this day. I am grateful to this man, Alexander Lowen, for bringing his knowledge to us, and for providing a model for this kind of work, this kind of development, and this kind of therapist. What he did took courage, devotion, hard work, and continuous effort to understand. What he does, demands a confrontation with egotism. It requires an intensely devoted curiosity and motivation, and a true wish to benefit others. He brings to his mission the unusual capacity to stay the course with his own personal development for a whole, long life-time.

I am moved by the closing pages of *Honoring the Body*. The loss of Leslie naturally sent Al into deep shock. In my few conversations with him since he lost Leslie, I was struck by his awareness of the life in him. »The body has always saved me«, he says, describing how he came back to life through walking. »Feeling the flow of energy in the body is fulfillment«. He not only identifies with the aliveness, he has an utterly non-egoistic, deep sense of respect, appreciation, and even reverence for the energetic movement in his body. I understand this state as a devout appreciation of life, aliveness, and being. During this period, too, he made another exciting discovery about grounding, the exercise he calls »connecting the feet to the earth«. After that, he was equally excited about re-discovering the somersault, age 93, as a way to work with the cervical block, allowing a better connection between head and body and, thus, fuller grounding.

One image, especially, stays in my heart. It is of Al walking and »saying the word, »Haaaa« . Walking, breathing, feeling the energy in his body. Just being. I realized I was seeing a naturally religious man. He studied the nature of love, without preaching love. He described in an innovative way

³ See also pages 142, 208, 210.

a naturalistic meaning of spirituality without a facade of being a spiritual person.⁴ He continues living his faith in life and the body. There is one other quality of a religious person he lives now.

»One could logically and correctly define God as the spirit of the universe. (...) If we can be like God, it is in that we can partake of his nature. That nature ... is Joy« (p. 128).

I see him in this light at this stage in his life.

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⁴ See pages 239, 240, 164, 239, 152, and 125–27 in that order for references in these three paragraphs.