

2007

THE BODY SYNERGY INTERVIEW
YOUR PARTNER IN HEALING

With Founder/Director
Matthew Cohen, MA, LMFT
By Eduardo Sierra,
Editor of Mutuality Matters

MATTHEW COHEN
WHEN YOU WANT A PARTNER IN HEALING





The Body Synergy Interview-2007 YOUR PARTNER IN HEALING

With Founder/Director

Matthew Cohen, MA, LMFT

By Eduardo Sierra, Editor of Mutuality Matters

When I first met Matthew, I immediately liked his presence as an elder and so I wanted to interview him. We met at a retreat. What began to flower was a friendship of the highest order, "spiritual brothers." Our conversations were deep, stimulating and enriching for both of us, shared insights and observations flowed. Reminds me of:

"Spiritual friendship is the whole of the spiritual life!" ~ Samyutta Nikaya

Myself, I'm not a bodywork professional; I am however, a bodywork connoisseur-*I appreciate good work!* Matthew was my guest while we attended a retreat in December. I was quite impressed with his honesty, good humor, clear expression and astute observing mind.

Matthew offers a willing ear and heartfelt feedback. He works as a licensed *Marriage & Family Therapist* and a certified practitioner of deep tissue bodywork. His approach to Body Psychotherapy has evolved for over 30 years.

As a 'house gift,' Matthew offered me a Body Psychotherapy session. **Beforehand, he coached me to use my consciousness to literally meet his touch so as to allow relaxing and healing to occur ... so simple and what a huge effect!** I felt tremendously healed and enjoyed that it was a joint effort.

Ah, here I'm already ahead of myself!

... Enjoy the interview!

Eduardo: As an amateur, my approach to massage is a strictly material plane one: when I find a knot of balled-up muscle ... I rub on it, to loosen the tension, so it can relax.

Matthew: That 'knot,' I call 'holding patterns in the tissues.' This holding, throughout the body, is simply noted when you look at someone standing, sitting or walking. It is an interlocking pattern of compensations for physical or emotional injury, or simply, "bad" postural habits. **Our posture isn't just physical; it's**

attitudinal.

Eduardo: I tend to attack tight muscles, to 'rub 'em out. It seems that your approach is way different. Would you describe it?

Matthew: I don't 'attack' holding patterns in the tissue; I *meet* them. I say to the tissue with my hands and energy, "I'm here to work *with* you, not *on* you." When I feel this *holding*, I talk the client through a breathing, a letting go process, **rather than trying to force an opening. The client's experience of actively letting go when they feel pressure or pain is crucial to self-healing.** They are letting go of "body armor." (Wilhelm Reich) or what I call holding patterns. Understandably we protect ourselves as we attempt to avoid pain, past or present. That protection becomes armor that imprisons the "softness" of our heart. **When my client and I breathe into their pain, it gently penetrates these holding patterns. With more conscious breathing, the restricted pattern begins to dissolve; that leads to deep relaxation.**

Eduardo: Well, isn't this where psychology comes in, and isn't it also on a cellular level?

Matthew: It's at the level of body, mind and spirit, which includes the cellular. When my fingers are talking to your tissue, I am communicating with the kinesthetic. Our kinesthetic ability feels and senses so much that we don't ordinarily need to, or are able to, put into words. This is why it is so effective to use supportive touch; it communicates care and respect and comes from a deep listening to the client. As my clients feel into this *hands-on* dialogue with me, they let go of their physical, emotional and mental defenses. This profound energetic event can definitely be understood as cellular change or even an alchemical one.

Eduardo: Can you just explain a little more how this dialogue works with a client?

Matthew: Let's take the example of someone who has a history of having been physically or sexually abused. Clearly their boundaries have been violated. To restore harmony, this person needs to have their own boundaries and have them honored by the other. **The therapeutic encounter is an opportunity to have such an emotionally corrective experience.** This event is carefully crafted to allow the client's feelings of vulnerability, in relation to earlier trauma, to become conscious. **This is where *holding patterns* aren't just physical; they are emotional as well.**

It's with an awareness of, and sensitivity to all this potential for healing, that I actively engage in this verbal and hands-on dialogue. **My responsibility is to help someone to become aware of his or her body process as an avenue for self-knowing and healing.** I do this when we sit and talk (during the first half of the two-hour session) or later when he or she is lying on my bodywork table. I do this in an infinite variety of ways.

When I'm physically releasing holding patterns, and silence isn't called for, I'm in continuous conversation with my client to gauge the impact my touch is having on their thoughts and feelings and what insights may be emerging from our earlier conversation. This is what Body Psychotherapy is.

One of the most important priorities is to develop a shared understanding about *good* pain and *bad* pain. Good pain is not only pleasurable but also safe. What makes it both pleasurable and safe, is that it's just the right amount, as perceived by the client. *Bad* pain is when clients are unable to let go or release. This

can be from my physical pressure being too much and too fast, or because of earlier traumatic experiences which activate habitual defenses. I coach clients so they know that I want them to tell me to stop for whatever reason. I don't assume to know their internal experience of being touched. **They come to know that fundamental to my approach is for us to share responsibility for what happens.**

Imagine how empowering it can be for someone who was abused to revisit their trauma, long held in their body and emotions, and become aware of their unconscious self-protective holding and then be able to breathe into it and find relief and spaciousness. **In my work, my intention is for whole being awakening. I know it's happening when their breathing deepens and a kindness and tenderness toward oneself emerges within them.**

Eduardo: So if I hit the "knots" with too much pressure, I can provoke their reactivity?

Matthew: Right. And you actually feel the person tighten up; their breathing will become shallow. That means you've gone too far, too fast. **You want people to open up, and let go of self-protective defenses; they were adaptive when it wasn't safe, but now they are in the way.** I do *relational bodywork* in that the relationship between therapist and client is key; it is a healing partnership.

Eduardo: So, you're ever monitoring and assessing?

Matthew: Yes, I'm constantly tracking the client and myself to bring maximum awareness to this opportunity to awaken in body-mind and spirit. Let me be even more specific about what's going on here in this healing dance. If and when this feeling of "I've got to go on hold" arises within clients and I don't catch it, in the exact moment, this failure of mine can be an unintended re-wounding. The minute I take my hands off and enter into dialogue, I'm communicating care and sensitivity to their vulnerability. This is emotionally reparative for the client, to be treated with such respect. I help them become aware of their own unconscious holding. Promoting their moment-to-moment self-awareness builds a deep trust between us and clients come to experience *their felt sense* of letting go and being present.

Eduardo: So, in this little dance, here come your hands giving pressure from outside and here comes my consciousness coming in to receive that by slowly opening to it. And then with a little bit of time, there is a release.

Matthew: Right. I remember I was working with one of my clients, who had broken his foot five weeks before. It was still mending and there was pain, unsteadiness and favoring going on. Before having him lie down, I asked him to walk around the room to help him to feel and visualize his patterns of compensation for the injury in his ankle, knee, hip, back and throughout the rest of his body.

Coaching in body awareness develops a predisposition to positive change and relief. This comes with increased self-awareness even before he lies down on my table. Given his level of whole being awakening, by the time the session was done, there was no more compensation. When he walked around the room there was no limp and no pain. It was really quite remarkable. This much change, so fast isn't so typical with everyone. This results when there is a whole lot of letting go, with very little resistance.

Eduardo: So now at the same time that the foot can sustain regular standing, you have released places built up in compensation?

Matthew: Exactly, and it's also important to understand that **this is not only a physical rehabilitative affair; it's also obviously happening in consciousness.**

In the process of learning to walk again, free of compensations, he is redefining himself. Rather than merely being a habituated body-mind, he's accessing his awareness of his body-process and consciousness to change his pattern of standing, sitting and movement. **In an awakened state, we have access to this capacity to know ourselves more fully physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually.** It doesn't even matter whether this particular client is consciously aware of what he's doing to change his posture. If he were an athlete or a dancer he certainly would be. What matters is that, even at a sub-conscious or unconscious level, the postural change process is going on. Interestingly, in the several months since I did that session with him, and without further work with me, he reports neither having any pain again nor limping, and that was after only five weeks of healing from a broken ankle with one session of *Body Synergy!*

Eduardo: How, at the cellular level does 'consciousness' fit into this picture?

Matthew: This is what my clients and I take note of during a session. It indicates that releasing is taking place resulting in movement in their consciousness indicated by their reports of greater insight and reduction in body stress and tension as their mind-body relationship comes into balance. This body process is an awakening process. Given the profound changes I have been witness to, there must be change at the cellular level. I am not current on the latest on-going scientific research that validates this. I do know it exists. **What needs to be understood is: when you look into the mystery of it all, cellular and consciousness are one and the same!**

Eduardo: Here's how I relate to consciousness. When you were working with me you invited my consciousness to meet you at your hands. Is that the role of consciousness here, or am I missing something?

Matthew: Eduardo, you're not missing a beat. **The consciousness of my hands resonating with the consciousness of your body says it all.** I'm just elaborating on what that consciousness includes that evidently comes through my hands. When I'm teaching other practitioners to incorporate this perspective into their work, I often talk about *making love* to the tissue. I purposely say it that way to get their attention. What is clearly understood though, is that **I'm talking about healing touch, not sexual touch. Referencing "making love" as a metaphor in the work, highlights the importance of intimacy and contact when I'm touching my clients. It's both professional and personal,** not just one or the other. With clear heart-centered boundaries that I have been honing for many years, it makes the work that much more healing and intuitive.

Eduardo: 'Crisis/opportunity' how does this idea apply in your work?

Matthew: Let's look at the notion of a "*healing crisis.*" This is a very important concept to impart to clients whether I'm sitting with an individual or a couple. Many people come because they believe or feel they are in crisis. And what I say is that it's not just a crisis, **it's a healing crisis.**

Eduardo: What do you mean by that?

Matthew: This is an opportunity for you to approach your life differently. When you discover the different, more creative response, you find the

healing. The crisis becomes a blessing in disguise and bodywork becomes a path to freedom.

For example, I was doing a session with a client, let's call her Judy, who was beginning to realize she had a mind-body split—her mind was functioning at a faster speed than her body. At her faster mental speed, she was getting tremendous pay off as a brilliant psychotherapist. But she was feeling conflicted by not feeling as connected to her body and, it turned out, her being. The tissue work in Body Psychotherapy helped her be more comfortable with choosing to slow down so she could feel more connected to her body. By dialoging, she realized how her quick mind was actually an intellectual compensation for historically not feeling safe in the presence of her mother's emotional demands.

Eduardo: That reminds me of Albert Einstein: "*The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift.*" So, your meeting her and her body, in her tissues, provoked all this insight and awareness?

Matthew: Well, yes. Judy brought great self-awareness and years of self-work (many verbal therapies, meditation and personal growth trainings) into her sessions with me. Where she needed to increase her consciousness was in the subtle sensitization to the non-verbal realm of bodily sensation so that she could feel the pleasure and connection with her being that comes with slowing down.

Eduardo: She had to meet you with consciousness there, right?

Matthew: Right. She awakened to her need to pay more attention to her body and in turn to realize that she needed to slow down in order to have a more fully embodied life, personally as well as professionally. And she started to see how she could become an even more astute psychotherapist by slowing down. She also realized that her faster pace had a quality of hyper-vigilance in it, which carried her right back into her family of origin and a mother who consistently violated her boundaries emotionally. So she had to run that faster pace to keep one step ahead of her mother.

Eduardo: What you're describing is fascinating. Look at the back-and-forth between the elements of the psychotherapy and the elements related to understanding the body. That seems to truly integrate the whole body.

Matthew: Yes, for a mentally oriented person, like Judy, to recognize that her body is a tremendous resource for connecting more deeply to herself so as to realize greater whole being, is a profound learning. Do you remember how you were standing and walking at the beginning of our session, then how you were at the end?

Eduardo: Oh yes, that was dramatic! First of all, I was bent instead of straight and rather stiff. I didn't feel light, I felt heavy beforehand. Certain places were in pain because of bound-up muscles. I was 'on hold' in my posture. I was walking as if I had a flat tire. Afterwards, I felt lighter and more balanced. My movement was fluid, the pain spots were loosened up. Gone was the tightness from holding a crooked posture. I was in my more natural upright and painless, posture.

Matthew: What was your experience of receiving the work?

Eduardo: The first thing I took from it was a deep appreciation, because I had been in pain in several places. And it wasn't like you went and did

something directly to the pain. But the dance you evoked when you asked me, as consciousness, to meet you at the pain, seemed to cause the release from pain, and that was very nice to experience. The sense of lightness corresponded with feeling more whole or complete within my body.

I felt the lightness was provoked, supported and energized by your spiritual presence in our interaction. Our energy going back and forth had, not only a mental and emotional component, but also a spiritual one. It seemed to me that I felt a 'whole body' well being. The spiritual side was energized or activated in relation to the other parts.

Matthew: That reminds me of how I first experienced that spiritual presence in myself as the practitioner. I'm going back some 30 years now to when I had a life-changing awakening that completely transformed my relationship to my work and clients to a level far beyond mere professional competence. It's been that way ever since.

Eduardo: And doesn't that lead directly to the fruitfulness of your work?

Matthew: The way I talked about it then, and for many years afterwards, was that **I started seeing the *inner beauty* of my clients. I hold that vision so they can see it themselves.** I felt as if I had been given this precious gift. But, I knew at the time that my ego could get in the way and really screw things up. I knew I had much work to do with myself to be worthy of the responsibility and trust that went along with this ability. It wasn't or isn't that I don't see, from my training, the ways in which we are all wounded. I do see, with the assistance of the various psychological paradigms I've studied and from examining my own life. **It's that I also crucially see the whole person who is always potentially simultaneously bigger than their limitations whether or not they are manifesting their bigness in a given moment.**

Eduardo: So what sort of new perspective has come to you in understanding this aspect of your work?

Matthew: Well, I'm holding a vision of the possible and that is what's getting transmitted. **It was Einstein who emphasized that imagination is more important than knowledge. For someone to know their own beauty, to see it, feel it, and be it, is to experience their essence, and not just their own, but the essences of others all around them. I now understand, so many years later, this *beauty* I see is our *divinity*.**

This is the manifestation of a pure state of being intertwined with the mundane world of outward form. Not incidentally, this is one of the meanings of the word *synergy*. (This is why I use that word in *Body Synergy*). **It only takes a second of awakening to catch a glimpse of our divinity and the divinity around us to have the encrusted self-defenses or holding patterns related to past insults and injuries, simply fall away. Then we are consciously connected simultaneously with both our humanity and divinity.**

Clients know when real caring occurs whether or not a word was spoken. I tell my students:

"Your clients don't care what you know until they know you care." This gets to the very heart of what it means to be both human and divine—living with compassion for self and other."