

THE POWER OF PRESENCE IN TRAUMA WORK:

An Elemental Embrace

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Editor's Note: Karuna Fluhart-Negrete offers here a report of her experience working with trauma. She emphasizes the importance of therapeutic presence that can provide the safety of containment, and outlines how five element theory can be used to understand dissociation in terms of patterns of distraction.

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Abstract: In order to resolve and heal the de-stabilizing effects of trauma it is necessary to apply present moment techniques. The author shares her experience that the resolution of latent or more recent traumatic events occurs only when the client is a conscious participant. Hakomi therapy applied with presence and skillful observation of elemental types is offered as an effective modality in trauma work that naturally accesses deep layers of experience. Applying mindfulness and presence in therapeutic interventions is shown to help clients return to more stable ground. The necessity of the client participating in this process is underlined. Client awareness is necessary for therapists to follow organic leads and guide them back to safety. When the client has cognitive understanding of present moment processing in therapy, the experience is theirs and the integrative results can be lasting.

I center my body and clear my mind.

Settling, my breath deepens as I check in;

How am I, in this present moment?

I sit, breathe and notice.

I press my feet firmly into the ground.

I listen to the water rushing through the creek bed.

I smile as the sun peeks through the clouds of a chilly day.

I gaze at the huge boulder and its reflection in the almost still river water below.

My heavy, slow physicality and dull mind remind me that I haven't properly cleared my energetic field of all

I've listened to, experienced and observed the last four days.

So I sit in reflection, mindful of my present state.

I connect with my body and the support all around me and I wait.

Eventually, I feel my crown open and energy begins to come in.

I smile and observe my energies gather and flow once again.

I rest in satisfaction for a few minutes before I go on to the next step.

Now I am able to share the power of presence.

Introduction -- Presence

The observations I have made in working with elemental principles through the years help create a safer environment for clients that are in the midst of difficult experience. Presence is necessary to provide stability and openness in

trauma and crisis work. It reassures the client that he or she is in a safe place.

The ability to maintain presence models confidence and makes the therapist a safe haven for the client. It is an invitation to possibility. It also demonstrates a readiness to listen. For one client it may provide grounding through the

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therapist. Another client may be able to turn inward to check, “How am I, here in this moment?”

In presence the therapist has room to monitor self while relating to the client’s current experience. It is our responsibility to accept clients where they are and invite them to share their experience. Presence allows space for pain and hurt. It acknowledges intense feelings and reactive tendencies. It can also contain the desire to sidetrack or the tendency to cling. Whether there is pain, denial, “spacing out” or chattering away, it is the quality of our presence that can greet it and begin contact with the clients underlying spirit. (An exception is when we become triggered and unable to maintain a neutral position. This is when we may consider making a referral, if it would be in the client’s best interest.)

Emotional displacement – for example, repressed anger can become depression.

Spiritual disconnection – often revealed as a lifelessness in the gaze, and lack of interest in previously loved activities.

Physical instability – a feeling of being uprooted, a sense of exile or homelessness.

Isolation from relationships – divorce, estrangement from friends or retreat into isolation.

Varying types and degrees of pain – physical accidents, catastrophic events, substance abuse.

The therapist must always bear in mind that reactions to trauma will vary depending upon factors such as physical health and psychological makeup. My holistic education has led me to rely on the wisdom of three modalities based on the five elements: Ayurveda, Buddhist Psychology and Polarity Therapy.

Five Element Theory

When the wisdom of the five element theory is applied, drastic states of imbalance can eventually be restored. The theory is based on observing the interactions of ether or space, air, fire, water and earth. In psychology these attributes are subtle and difficult to detect. The descriptions that follow should help a practitioner begin to use these tools. With practice in the technique, even very subtle imbalances can be identified.

Every organism reflects the interactive qualities of these elements. Each living being is in fact a unique composition of the elements. By recognizing this we can utilize ancient diagnostic systems of healing. Balancing the elements can bring relief from various states of distress, trauma and disconnection.

Our first task is to decide which element is out of balance. Only then can our diagnosis and treatment be accurate. The presence we hold in a session can then re-establish stability and elemental harmony. Or we can provide contact that is elementally supportive.

When a client presents traumatic material it is our presence which connects us and states “you are safe here,” just as it gives us the courage to be non-judgmental in difficult situations. In presence we can witness our own judgments and other reactions without giving in to them. Only in this way can our words be supportive.

Effects of Trauma

Trauma can extinguish all resources. It scrambles any sense of wholeness. It strips away confidence. Sometimes trauma can be so harsh that it separates people from themselves, their relations and communities. Some effects of trauma include:

I have successfully applied elemental theory to tendencies presented in psycho-emotional states of imbalance. In this article I will restrict myself to three patterns of disassociation, which I will simply refer to as Air, Fire and Earth Personalities depending upon the element that is present in excess. Defining these patterns has proved useful for me in working with psycho-emotional trauma. (Please note that my use of the term “disassociation” differs from the that by which personality disorders are described in the *DSM IV; Diagnostic & Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Volume Four.*)

The elemental dissociative Types that I am referring to, reflect a distraction pattern. Such a pattern tends to prevent the client from being in the present. It distances him or her from sharing vulnerable states. Thus it prevents the deepening of experience. But it is by accessing the deeper core material that trauma can be resolved. The therapist must take care, of course, not to delve into core material prematurely. The cautious pace is slow. I try to build a relationship with the client and get curious about their tendencies. Thus I get a sense of her or his overall state, story, affect and physical presentation. Then I can supply support that grounds their specific type towards a neutral state.

Type: Air Quality

The first elemental Type of dissociation I will discuss here is Air. An Air Quality person has the tendency to lose focus. This element is most easily seen in movement. As the wind blows, tree limbs sway. Fallen leaves may scatter

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and swirl in a chaotic manner. In a similar way, an Air Type person may talk incessantly, a pattern that creates one way conversations. Discussion may hop from one topic to another with no identifiable subject matter.

An excess of Air Quality can present as nervousness. This may be seen as a constantly moving leg or a tapping finger. Often an Air Quality Client talks with her hands moving. An example of traumatic Air Type disassociation is convulsive sobbing. Breathing then becomes difficult. Excess talking can also be an expression of insecurity or anxiety. The hyperactivity is a distraction from the Air Type's underlying trauma.

In one sense these patterns help the person, for the elemental forms of disassociation are, indeed, coping strategies. But at some point the behavior prevents a lasting experience of healing from occurring. Our goal, then, is to work back into a state of relaxed parasympathetic (belly) breathing. Only here can the client cognitively and physiologically relate to the current effects of the trauma.

Often I have observed the Air Client revert to a child state. His voice gets very quiet and he often sounds far away. Sometimes a client can be so quiet that I ask them whether they are still with me. It's very important here to keep verbal contact. If touch is consented to, I may ask them to reach out and touch my hand. Sometimes it is best to guide them to feel their own leg or the chair they are sitting on. I have found in some instances that they are not able to do so. Touch and grounding exercises are imperative for re-establishing present moment contact with an Air Type. I often keep them in touch with my voice and sometimes will offer a warm towel or blanket. This brings the Air Type more fully back into physical experience. More traumatic Air personality features include fear, shaking, paranoia and trembling. All of these symptoms enable the client to avoid quiet confrontation with the disturbing reality that underlies them.

The primary resource to apply in these cases is reconnection through contact. I offer contact through touch or voice, energy or mental intention. To supply warmth with blankets or a heat lamp can also be supportive. The colors orange, red or yellow in the form of lighting, painted walls or a cloth or other object can provide warmth and grounding.

Type: Fire Quality

The second elemental Type of dissociation I will discuss is the Fire Type. A Fire personality is always reasoning, fixing or planning. These clients like to keep active and have tremendous energy. They are masters at maintaining a sense of control. With discipline they can get a lot done, but the same energy can become a limitation.

Even subconsciously, the Fire Type has the tendency to manipulate directives or suggestions. Thus such a client

tends to reject advice. All the same, a Fire Type needs supportive direction to learn to allow a process to unfold naturally.

I find it takes tremendous compassion and care to nurture this Type. Acceptance from the therapist as an outside influence and witness is extremely important, and may be the missing link they've searched for. Kind, gentle reassuring words are called for and perhaps even granting permission to relax in silence. At times I offer to assist them. It is here that they can soften into accepting the possibility of teamwork.

A Fire Type often uses images and stories to support his or her beliefs. There is a tendency to fixate on results and goals. The tendency I have observed in Fire Type disassociation is to do too much, preventing a natural organic flow.

The therapist should be aware of instances of circling around issues. This may be a sign that the time is not right to go further but to stop, and catch the pattern, with curiosity and gentle redirection. At times like this a client can begin to move away from a pattern of self-limitation.

It is the awareness here that is important. Only the client's first-hand experience can provide an understanding of the patterns of limitation. With awareness, the possibility of choice can enter the world of beliefs and limitation. Then the active, astute mind of a Fire Type can access the nourishment they desire. Self empowerment is especially important with a Fire personality. Beliefs can run deep. When the question of changing themselves arises, they may assent intellectually, but there is almost always resistance. This is because honor and responsibility may be affected. The Fire Type's greatest fears are failure and dishonor.

The qualities to apply in working with Fire Types are a blend of kind words and spacious allowance. As therapists, we want to support the process of unfolding without interfering in the client's natural process, but gently redirecting it. In this way the Fire personality softens into a partnership free of expectation and performance. I want my client to perceive the possibility of choice. Only then can they become balanced, healthy and liberated.

Type: Earth Quality

The third elemental Type of dissociation is the Earth personality. Earth is the most dense or solid aspect of the elements. In nature it is represented not only by soil but in the density of boulders or crystals, their hardness and impenetrability. The Earth Type personality is often unconscious of their trauma. When questioned about bodily pain or emotional turmoil they deny it. However, once the exterior layers of their physicality soften, their ability to feel increases. In this case, the therapist needs to be prepared for intense emotion. What emerges may be an old experience

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buried deep in the subconscious mind, or a cellular memory of the body releasing from the tissues. I like to describe the Earth Type in trauma as “frozen.” They are often unaware until some thawing occurs.

As the Air Type, the Earth Type also requires warmth. They benefit from movement. Sometimes I offer stimulation through subtle rocking or gentle verbal probing. I may direct an Earth Type to stand up to more fully embody her experience, for example by twisting from side to side, to boost her state of alertness and energy. Within a frozen state, there may be material buried deep beneath the surface. It is not my primary intention to dredge up traumatic experience. However, it is always necessary to be prepared for surprises. When working with the Earth Type I pay a lot of attention to my intuition. I shelf the information I gather internally as I listen to my client’s report. I maintain contact with them and my own personal experience.

Once, for example, I was doing a body-mind integrated session on a massage table. As I tuned in to the client’s body, my shoulders got heavy and began to hurt. Curious, I inquired if the client had noticed anything in her shoulders. She denied any such pain, so I let it go. However it persisted in my own body. I didn’t push it. A little later my client told me her shoulders were heavy and she was in fact experiencing pain. She said to me “I didn’t realize it, when you asked before. I was so out of touch.” Smiling at her words, I noticed the pain in my own shoulders subside.

We continued to work together and gently progressed to an unfolding of a very traumatic life event. It was an event that had a life changing effect and in fact was the basis of her current life work. Once again it had been worthwhile to

listen to my intuition while continuing to track and contact the client’s actual experience.

Mindfulness and Elemental Experiences

I marvel at the possibilities that arise through the various elemental Types of human experience in integrated process work. Through non-violent guidance and presence, the therapist becomes a model of unity waiting to unfold. The client’s personal elemental communication style is then allowed to evolve. Now unmet needs can access the appropriate resources, grounding into a place of stability and safety.

My work is not about getting the client to change. It is focused on offering varied supports towards nourishment, fulfillment and understanding. I want to help as many people as I can find some satisfaction within their current states of need. Mindfulness and the Hakomi process are the most important means toward this goal.

It is in mindfulness I can observe myself and the other while simultaneously creating an environment for present experience. Identifying elemental tendencies in my clients opens up many possibilities. When I acknowledge the various expressions of disassociation as energy, fear of the unknown dissolves. Then the presence I carry maintains the safety of containment. Whether watching my own tendencies and responses or witnessing my clients’ varied experiences I strive to maintain a neutral position as I wait to see how yet another relationship will evolve towards self-healing.