

Ron Kurtz

A Little History

Ron Kurtz

Editor's Note: In this contribution Hakomi Founder Ron Kurtz offers some of his latest reflections on the how the Hakomi method developed over time from its beginnings in the 1970's.

Ron Kurtz is the Founder of the Hakomi Institute and the Director of Ron Kurtz Trainings. Author and co-author of three influential books (*Body-Centered Psychotherapy*, *The Body Reveals*, and *Grace Unfolding*), Ron has led hundreds of Hakomi trainings and Hakomi workshops around the world over the last quarter of a century. At present he is leading trainings in the USA, Japan and Mexico. In 2008 he was nominated by the Hakomi Institute for the lifetime achievement award from the United States Association for Body Psychotherapy, which he received at the 2008 USABP Conference. He can be contacted through his website www.ronkurtz.com.

ABSTRACT: Hakomi Therapy founder Ron Kurtz offers a reflection on the historical development of the method from the early 1970's to 2008.

... he [Brian Arthur] linked these to a different way in which action arises, through a process he called a "different sort of knowing." "You observe and observe and let this experience well up into something appropriate. In a sense, there's no decision making, he said. "What to do just becomes obvious. You can't rush it. Much of it depends on where you're coming from and who you are as a person. All you can do is position yourself according to your unfolding vision of what is coming. A totally different set of rules applies. You need to 'feel out' what to do. You hang back, you observe. You're more like a surfer or a really good race car driver. You don't act out of deduction, you act out of an inner feel, making sense as you go. You're not even thinking. You're at one with the situation.

--C. Otto Scharmer (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2005) quoting economist Brian Arthur

Beginnings: Eastern philosophy, psychotherapeutic technique, and systems theory

I started doing psychotherapy in 1970. By 1979 I'd developed enough original techniques and ideas to justify calling the combination a new method. The Hakomi Institute started the same year. Eight years later, in 1987, Swami Rama told me that I had a mission: to create a new method of psychotherapy. When I think about Hakomi, I think: in what way is it a new method of psychotherapy? Before I talk about that though, I would like to give you a little more history.

My life as a psychotherapist began long before that meeting. It started in graduate school, in the early sixties when I was a student of experimental psychology. After graduate school, I taught at San Francisco State. My first real excitement about therapy and groups came from my experiences at a workshop led by Will Schultz. It was something totally new to me and I became very excited about what he was doing. One of my friends from graduate school, Stella Resnick, was teaching nearby, at San Jose State. She had studied clinical psychology and was on her way to becoming a well-known Gestalt therapist. She encouraged me and we started co-leading sensitivity groups. I also took more workshops. That is how I got involved with psychotherapy. Most of what I learned derived from Gestalt therapy.

For the next two years, I taught at San Francisco State and co-led groups with Stella. After that I went to Albany, New York, and started a private practice. I used mostly what I learned about Gestalt. Soon after starting private practice, I went into therapy myself, first with Ron Robbins and later with John Pierrakos, both Bioenergetic therapists. I began to incorporate some Bioenergetics into my work. Before I had read Perls, now I read Reich and Lowen. I was also inspired by the work of Albert Pesso. Those experiences were the beginning of the Hakomi Method.

Two more things strongly influenced me. The first was eastern philosophy. I had been practicing yoga since 1959. In graduate school I got interested in Taoism and Buddhism. Awareness practices became part of my life. I started macrobiotics in 1972. My strong interest in Eastern philosophy and working with the body led me to Feldenkrais work. I took several workshops with Moshe and practiced the floor exercises. I also began being Rolfed at that time. All of this found its way into my thinking, my work and my writing.

The last strong influence on the work was my life-long

Ron Kurtz

interest in science. I was a math prodigy of sorts and always loved science. I minored in physics in undergraduate school and, for four years I worked as a technical writer in electronics. My passion has been systems theory, especially the branch that studies living systems.

These threads: eastern philosophy, psychotherapeutic technique, and systems theory are the foundations of Hakomi.

From Force to Experiments in Mindfulness

The Bioenergetic techniques I was using seemed too forceful to me, at times even violent. In keeping with the eastern philosophies I'd studied, I wanted to be non-violent. So, I began to look for other ways to access and work with emotional material. Slowly I found ways to incorporate mindfulness and gentle interventions into my work. I began to use mindfulness this way: In the course of working with a person, I would get an idea about something the person believed that limited him or diminished his aliveness. I gathered a lot of experience interpreting behavior for what beliefs might be running it. Let's say the person believed he was not worth anything. At an appropriate time, I would ask him to become mindful. (Sometimes, I taught people how to become mindful.) When he was in a mindful state, I would offer a statement that was precisely the opposite of his belief. For example, I would say something like: "You're a worthy person". I called these statements probes and I would set them up as little experiments. (My science background.) I'd say, "What happens when I say....", and then I'd offer the statement. I was looking for reactions. A person in mindfulness has no trouble noticing his or her reactions.

I slowly started doing more and more of these little experiments in mindfulness. The client and I would observe the reactions. Sometimes, the reaction would be intensely emotional. So here was a way of accessing deep feelings around significant issues, arrived at completely without force. Just what I'd been looking for. The statements I offered were always positive, supportive and potentially nourishing. The reaction was the result of the person's not being able to accept this potential nourishment. As soon as I understood what some core issue was, I could usually bring it into awareness in an embodied, nonviolent way, using mindfulness.

So, when I think about what's new about the Hakomi method, I think this is one of the main things: Hakomi is the evocation of experience in mindfulness. It uses mindfulness in this precise way. This is not just another technique. It is a fundamental difference in method. We evoke experiences while the client is in this particular state of consciousness. The experiences evoked tell us what kind

of models the client is holding about herself and her world. More importantly, the models are often immediately clear to the client. This method can often release emotions that might be hard to approach any other way. I think this is because the client knows what's happening. There are no tricks or manipulations here. Going into a state of mindfulness is a deliberate choice and not always easy. The client chooses it, chooses to be vulnerable. Clients relax their defenses when they become mindful. They choose to take what comes. If they feel painful emotions in this process, it is because they believe it is worth it in order to understand themselves. They are willing to bring painful material into consciousness. There is no violence here, only the courage to face what is. Amazingly, this method accesses feelings and memories much more quickly than any other I have used.

Non-Violence and Taking Over

I eventually de-emphasized Gestalt and Bioenergetics. I used mindfulness to evoke emotions, insights, and memories. I also started to process emotional reactions in a different way. I started "taking them over".

That's the second thing that makes Hakomi unique, our way of working with "defenses", what we call taking over. When an emotional experience is evoked, the habits that manage that experience are also evoked. (These management reactions are usually called defense mechanisms. I don't like the disease/war model implications of that terminology. For me, it's management.) For example, sadness is often managed by covering the face, tightening the muscles of the diaphragm, chest, throat and eyes, bowing ones head and folding forward. Those reactions manage emotional experience; they contain it, minimize what was once too much. Often, they avoid it completely. I do not oppose these management habits or in any way try to force them to break down. I do exactly the opposite. I support all spontaneous management behavior. If a person tightens his shoulders or covers his face, I might use my hands to help him keep his shoulders together or to cover his face. That's taking over. Of course, I first ask permission. And I introduce mindfulness where I can. "What happens when I do this...." And I slowly bring my hands up and place them over her hands that are already hiding her face.

Taking over can also be done verbally. It could happen like this: I offer somebody a probe such as, "Your feelings are okay", and she hears a voice inside say, "No! They're not!" Then I might take that inside voice over. I tell the person what I'd like to try and ask if that seems okay to them. Then, with the help of another person, we take over the inside voice and repeat the whole exchange a few times, with me saying, "Your feelings are okay" and whoever is assisting saying, "No! They're not!" All the while, the client is again in mindfulness.

That “No! They’re not!” voice the client hears in her head is also management behavior. It tells me that, in her model of life, there is something wrong with believing that you feelings are okay. Perhaps she was punished for feeling sexual or too happy. It’s not safe to have those feelings, so it’s not okay. That’s the model. That’s the belief system. So, we take over the voice that manages this.

The usual results of taking over are these: the person relaxes a bit and gets some distance and a wider perspective on the management behavior. Listening to the dialog that usually takes place inside while in a state of mindfulness allows new reactions to appear, from parts of the self that have not been heard from before. Memories of significant events related to the core belief come into consciousness, when a therapist covers a client’s eyes or while voices are being taking over. Strong bodily experiences, pain and intense feelings can be evoked.

There are important messages in what the therapist is doing. If you are managing your sadness by tightening your shoulders and I begin to help you with that, the messages are: you’re not alone in your sadness; you have an ally. Someone is on your side, accepting what you yourself have not yet accepted. It may be the first time you’ve gotten these messages about your sadness. And, you don’t have to work as hard. You’re being supported. It’s possible to let go a little. It’s not that you have to let go. Nobody is forcing you to let go. You’ve simply been offered the opportunity. Letting go is up to you. And you can do it at your own pace. You can allow the feelings you are managing to come forth and be expressed. This is another way that the method is nonviolent.

When you are not opposed or made wrong, when you feel that somebody is on your side, you may be able to go a lot deeper into your experience, than you could if you were struggling with it all by yourself. The act of taking over sends messages like these: “I can see that this is difficult for you.” “I’m willing to help you handle this experience.” “I’ll follow your lead.” “I won’t force anything.” “I’ll support your need to control your own process.” Taking over sends these messages through the therapist’s actions, not through words.

These actions speak directly to the unconscious, as words rarely do. For that reason, the therapist must be extremely sensitive to the client’s reactions, when communicating this way. The therapist must constantly follow the client’s behavior, like gestures, facial expressions and tone of voice. The therapist must “read” these signs for what they tell about the client’s experience. By doing this, the therapist learns when to go forward and when to back off, what’s helpful and what is not, through following these bodily expressions. When these actions are right, they are powerful. When they’re wrong, they simply evoke more management behavior.

Typically, supporting management behaviors, leads to feelings of safety, relaxation, feeling, expression, insight, and movement of the emotional process through to a helpful completion. These results seem paradoxical. A part of the person is trying to manage her experience, to hold it back or minimize it. The therapist offers support for that and the person’s experience deepens and moves on. But, that’s what taking over does.

So, these two aspects of the method, using evoked experiences in mindfulness and the nonviolent taking over the management of the experiences evoked, are the elements that make Hakomi a “new method of psychotherapy”. And with that, I’m straight with the Swami.

Working with the Signal to Noise Ratio

From a systems point of view, the use of mindfulness can be seen as a method of making the system more sensitive. A sensitive system is one that can pick out a weak signal from a noisy background. What is considered signal depends upon what the person is trying to hear (see, understand...) and the noise is anything that tends to mask that signal. If you’re trying to hear someone talking and there’s music playing nearby, the talk is signal and the music is noise. If you’re trying to listen to the music, the talk is noise. It is totally relative.

To increase sensitivity, one must find ways to improve the capacity to detect the signal or find ways to lower the noise. Increasing one’s ability to detect the signal or to lower the noise, or to do both. These are the options.

Mindfulness does both. By calming down and quieting the mind, it lowers the noise. By turning inward and focusing on present experience, it enhances ones capacity to pick up sensations, feelings, thoughts, images; all the things that body oriented psychotherapists are interested in. Eastern philosophy teaches that when the mind becomes silent, a direct experience of spirit emerges. That signal, like the stars which appear when the sun goes down, is really always present. But it is hidden by the noise we make. And the biggest noise is the clamoring of the ego absorbed mind. In body-centered psychotherapies the signals being sought are derived from bodily experiences. The “abstract attitude” as Varela calls it, too much talk, analysis and speculation can all be considered noise. But so can bodily experience itself. All management behavior is involved in minimizing some signals. And if those are signals we’re interested in (and we are), then in that sense, management behavior is creating noise.

Mindfulness, which involves the relaxation of management and effort and quieting the mind, lowers the noise. Being mindful means deliberately bringing yourself into a sensitive and vulnerable condition. That’s how it works in

psychotherapy. If you're busy lifting weights and listening to the radio, and I come in and say, "you're worthy," you're just going to say hello. You're not going to react much to my words. But if you're mindful, sensitive, and quiet, if your mind is open and simply noticing, the same statement can evoke quite a deep experience. Using mindfulness is a way of lowering the noise.

Non-violence is a necessary part of this because in order for the client to become vulnerable (mindful), he or she has to feel safe. So, the first task of a Hakomi therapist is to make the other person feel safe. There are many ways to do that, but the most basic is to have an active, deep respect and compassion for all beings. Then the other truly is safe. All you have to do is convey your respect and compassion to the other person, which, since they are real and natural, will happen sooner or later, in any case. If you are going to use mindfulness in therapy, non-violence and safety are absolutely essential. It doesn't work any other way.

When the noise is lowered, whatever signal is being masked will emerge. It appears, as out of a fog. When the client is in mindfulness and experiences are evoked, there is no confusion about the source. The client is clear that whatever emerges, it's hers. She knows that the emotional response is her own and that it's based on her own beliefs and history. The therapist is not asking her to believe anything. They're not having a discussion about what might be going on. The two of them are doing little experiments in mindfulness together and they're discovering the results. She becomes vulnerable, she lowers the noise and the signals emerge. Using this method, we avoid interpreting or explaining a person to herself. She discovers who she is and how she's organized for herself, at her own pace, within a safe setting and with a trusted guide. So, two of the main advantages of this method are that it supports personal responsibility (by showing clearly how experiences are organized by inner models and beliefs) and that it avoids confusion (by studying and processing evoked experiences in the here and now, letting the person discover who she is rather than theorizing about that).

Here is one of the connections to Taoism and Feldenkrais work and the Gestalt notion of figure and ground: awareness itself lowers the noise. When you turn your awareness toward something, you automatically lower the noise. When you start to pay attention to something, that is when you make it the signal (or the figure), other things will automatically fade out—the noise will lower by itself. If you draw attention to movements in slow motion, as Feldenkrais does, you will start to notice things that you did not notice before. Bare attention gives time for signals to develop. The more time you take, the more information you get. In mindfulness attention is concentrated. The pace is slower. One's usual concerns are set aside. The focus is on present experience, as it is in Taoism, Feldenkrais, Gestalt and other consciousness disciplines.

From What Works to Spirituality

I built this therapy out of these components because I found that they worked. It was mostly trial and error, not shaped by any grand plan. Like any stubborn fool, I had to find out for myself. I read. I got ideas. But I never accepted them without trying them out. When I tried mindfulness and non-violence, they worked. If I created safety, people could get mindful. When I did little experiments in mindfulness, something important would be evoked. It was easy. It worked. And I liked the fact that it was non-violent, full of compassion. It felt good to me. I wasn't thinking about the long run. I was using what worked and I really didn't see what was coming.

When I built Hakomi on the principles of non-violence and mindfulness, it gave the therapy a strong spiritual foundation. Working out of those principles which require respect, sensitivity, presence and compassion on the part of the therapist, leads very naturally to loving experiences and finally to spiritual experiences. The method is pointed in that direction. Hakomi has been called applied Buddhism. It had built into it, from the beginning, this spiritual direction. This became clear slowly, as I developed the method and added techniques.

Here's how it happened. The work evolved both vertically and horizontally. Let me explain. Horizontal growth means more of the same, like more computers everywhere. Vertical growth means something new, like the Internet, linking all those computers. Vertical growth is a change in form, an emerging of new capabilities. A child learning new words is growing horizontally. Learning to use words in sentences is vertical growth. (The concepts of vertical and horizontal growth are from Ken Wilber's (1995) influential book *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*.)

Adding new techniques to Hakomi was a horizontal development. Techniques are more or less all on the same level. Adding new techniques is horizontal expansion. But, the introduction of mindfulness was different. It was more than just a new technique. It was a vertical jump. It influenced all the techniques. It gave the method an added depth. Using mindfulness, I could do things that I couldn't do before. Adding mindfulness gave the therapy greater power and shifted the way all techniques were used. In addition, it made non-violence essential and that in turn made the personal development of the therapist essential.

From the Intrapsychic to the Interpersonal

The Healing Relationship

Ron Kurtz

I used to think of psychotherapy as intrapsychic, that the client did all the work internally. The therapist suggested things, but was, basically not really involved as a person. That was the way I thought. I thought of myself as a technician. My image was the samurai, in the movie Seven Samurais, who was a master swordsman, but who did what he did without emotions, passion or personality. His goal was perfect precision. I thought of myself in that same way, as trying to master techniques. It was no doubt inspired by a character flaw of mine, but I liked that image: precise, technical, without feelings or personal involvement. I took a secret pride in that.

Eventually though I saw that, the difficulties that emerged in therapy were the result of my personal limitations, my incomplete personhood. They weren't technical problems at all and it wasn't about mastery. It was my ego, my puffed up attitude and my inability to understand people, because I didn't understand certain things in myself. It was about my ability to relate. Again, the focus changed and the change was a vertical one. It was deeper than just technique. I came to a place where I focused for a few years on what I called the healing relationship. For a healing relationship to happen, more than just safety was needed; what was needed was the cooperation of the unconscious. It required a relationship at the level of the unconscious, a deep, person-to-person connection – and that's a two way street. Not only did I learn that I needed the cooperation of the unconscious, I also learned that I had to be worthy of it. I needed to earn it.

The healing relationship involves two basic things. First, the therapist has to demonstrate that she's trustworthy, non-judgmental and compassionate. Second, she has to demonstrate that she is present, attentive and really understands what's going on for the person. If the therapist can consistently demonstrate those things to the person, she will earn the cooperation of the unconscious.

The unconscious is waiting for somebody who can do that. If the client has painful secrets, shame, confusion and emotional pain, the therapist will need extraordinary sensitivity, understanding and caring to become an ally of the unconscious. The unconscious has been managing this pain for a long time. It won't allow just anyone to become part of that process. The healing relationship is about gaining the trust and cooperation of the unconscious through compassion and understanding. If you can do that, therapy really happens. Building such a relationship doesn't have to take three months or three years. It can take as little as fifteen minutes. But creating it requires more than just technical skills.

The creation of a healing relationship in therapy requires that the therapist be a certain kind of person, a person who is naturally compassionate, able to be radically present, able to give full attention to another, able to see deeply into people

and to understand what is seen. All of that takes a certain state of mind. We could call that state of mind non-egocentric. The therapist needed to be free of as many ego-centered habits as possible, when working with the client. Realizing that and teaching that was the next big vertical jump for Hakomi. This jump was beyond just the use of mindfulness and non-violence. It was about who the therapist was, the therapist's being. It was about the therapist's consciousness.

The Development of the Therapist

This next step in the vertical evolution of Hakomi involved the spiritual development of the therapist. It involved the development of personhood, an expansion of understanding and insight into levels of consciousness beyond the ordinary, rational and objective. To sustain this higher level of consciousness, one needs a base, a source of inspiration. One needs to find, recognize and cultivate a source of spiritual (or non-egocentric) nourishment. With a stable connection to that source, confidence, calm, understanding and compassion come naturally.

Outside of therapy, there are many, many sources of spiritual nourishment. But in the present moment of a therapy process, the source I use is the client. I search for and find non-egocentric nourishment in some aspect of the client. This is very close to the Buddhist practice of searching for the seed of Buddha in every person. Or as Swami Premananda says, "The purpose of life is to see God in everyone and everything." When he was asked how this was done, he replied, "In the silence." The idea is to drop the "noise of self" and to see the other as spirit. With this as a habit, with this as a base, therapy becomes a deeply heartfelt journey shared.

Working this way, compassion emerges spontaneously. With the mind quiet and attentive, understanding comes easily. The two qualities most important to the healing relationship, compassion and understanding, are the natural outcome of searching for non-egocentric nourishment from the therapist-client relationship. The development of that practice is a spiritual discipline and its fruition is personhood and full human beingness. It is this approach that makes psychotherapy a spiritual practice.

Some years ago, I read Michael Mahoney's book (1991) *Human Change Processes*. In it he cited a few, twenty-year long studies that showed that "the 'person' of the therapist is at least eight times more influential than his or her theoretical orientation and/or use of specific therapeutic techniques." I took that very seriously. I realized I couldn't just teach people technical methods. I had to define, recognize and teach "personhood" that includes spiritual development. Up to a point, it is personal growth and the usual emotional work that we all have to do. But beyond

that, and especially when you wish to become helpful to other people, spiritual development is the natural and necessary next step.

So I started to focus on the state of mind of the therapist. I developed methods to explore and support the spiritual development of the therapist. My trainings and workshops now include a lot of work and practice around that. That brings us up to date on the development of the Hakomi Method. The principles of mindfulness and non-violence were the beginning of the uniqueness of Hakomi and the last vertical jump was the focus on spiritual practice and the state of mind of the therapist.

The Place of the Body and Immediate Experience

Now, I want to talk about the place of the body in psychotherapy. Besides its focus on mindfulness, etc., Hakomi is definitely a body psychotherapy.

Several things come to my mind when I think of the body in psychotherapy. The first is Reich's notion that the body is an expression of the psychological history of the person. The body reveals psychological information. Reich talked about taking a person's history. You don't need to ask about it; a person's psychological history is alive and present in everything the person does and the style in which he does it. It's in how people use their bodies, how they move, where the tension is, what the posture is like, and the structure. So, you can look at the body for psychological information. In Hakomi we teach people how to do that. We learn about the person's history, their core models and beliefs, from all these things: posture, movement patterns, breathing patterns, gestures, body structure, facial expression, pace, tone of voice, and on and on. All of this gives us psychological information. This understanding of the expressions of self through the body is a basic component of body psychotherapy.

Another aspect of body psychotherapy is that it is experiential. In Hakomi, we focus on bodily experiences, like sensations, emotions, tensions and movements. This focus on experience, rather than abstract notions, leads to more grounded insights and understanding. We discover the roots of psychological organization and we find meaning by working with here and now experiences. The body is alive with meaning and memory. We focus on experience, not for its own sake, but to learn from them how we came to be who we are, and how we shall move on.

If I do an experiment in mindfulness and evoke an emotional experience, any meanings we find are grounded in bodily experience. The person may respond with something like, "Yeah my heart feels like it's in my throat. My stomach is tight. I'm a little nauseous and I feel afraid."

We're not discussing what might be true or what might have happened thirty years ago. We're discussing what is happening right now. And what is always happening right now is that beliefs, attitudes and emotions are influencing bodily events and felt experiences. Your mind is hooked up to your physiology.

From the Creation (experience) to the Creator (core beliefs)

So, one of the ways Hakomi is body centered is that it uses experience as the doorway to insight. It uses the bodily experience to evoke meaning. If you're in mindfulness and I say, "Dogs are friendly" and you react with fear and disbelief, there's no question about what model you're holding. As soon as you're in touch with those beliefs and those emotions, clear memories are likely to follow. And when memories are present, explanations aren't needed. Even more important, when beliefs are conscious, doubt becomes possible. Change becomes possible. The key thing is to get the connection between the beliefs and the experiences.

Here is how Hakomi works: the practice of loving presence helps the client feel safe and understood. That makes mindfulness possible. The therapist then finds ways (little experiments) to evoke experiences in mindfulness. The meaning of the evoked bodily experiences are understood as direct expressions of core beliefs (models of self and the world that organize all experience). When these core beliefs are made conscious and understood, change becomes possible. Where core beliefs are limiting, destructive, unbalanced or painful, they can be challenged. New beliefs can be tried and new experiences evoked. I call these missing experiences. Safety, peace, freedom, aliveness are a few.

If there is conflict about the expression of certain emotions, we support the actions that manage that expression (but only if we have permission to do so). This usually results in a deeper, more complete and more satisfying release and, as is often the case when emotional expression goes beyond habitual boundaries, spontaneous insight and integration follow. The missing experience emerges and the process evolves into savoring and integrating.

Of course it's not all that linear. We often loop back to earlier steps, spending time building the relationship, trying new experiments, evoking new experiences and all that. But the general drift of each session and the therapy process as a whole tends to move in the direction I have described. As a therapy process unfolds, I support each stage and each new development. I never use force against "resistance". Trying to overcome resistance usually creates more resistance. Force evokes counterforce. So, I back off when I see that the client doesn't want to go any faster or pursue a particular

Ron Kurtz

direction. I try to understand why and maybe explore with the client what he or she needs around that. I'm not in any rush and have no need to push. But neither am I passive.

As I have already said, I work with core beliefs and models. We get to those models through the methods I've already talked about. We call the process of uncovering basic models "going for meaning". We want to help people change their models. Again, this is not an intellectual process. It's mental, but it's not abstract. For the person holding the model, it is not theory at all. It is real. The deepest models are not even questioned. They are not in consciousness, but they are in use. They are old habits, organizing all experience, all the time.

It is as if you had been wearing colored glasses all your life. If they are orange colored glasses, you have never really seen the color blue. You don't know what blue is, or that it even exists. All blue looks black to you. And if you don't know you are wearing orange glasses, you never will question the black you see. The deepest models you are using determine your perceptions and other behaviors. Those models are your truth. They determine what you think, what you do and what you feel.

One very significant thing about Hakomi is that it brings these core models into consciousness. It gets to the core beliefs and meanings that run your life. This gives you a chance to examine and to change them. Using mindfulness people learn, through their immediate reactions, exactly how they habitually organize themselves and their world.

Transformation: Organizing in Missing Experiences

When we help bring a limiting core belief into consciousness, we then want to provide an experience that challenges it. Some core beliefs are extreme and rigidly maintained. For example, a person might believe, at a core level, that no one can be trusted. A devastating experience of betrayal can make this belief seem to be a good one to hold, since it protects against further betrayal. A person with this core belief will be cautious with everyone and won't really trust anyone. This person may withdraw from contact and prefer to be alone – because it feels safer. Well, this model is extremely limiting. The truth is that some people are trustworthy and some people aren't. Some people will hurt you and some people won't. You just have to be able to tell the difference. To do that, you will need to experience trust. It is a missing experience we now work to create.

You won't know the depth of your distrust, until something happens to illuminate it. When you work with this issue, it may become clear that you've never felt safe anywhere. Now you can work with that fear, go through it, survive it,

finish it, and create the possibility of feeling safe.

So, a big part of the method is creating the missing experience. It can be powerful. Someone who has never felt safe is going to have a powerful experience when they finally do. What's useful is to spend time with it, stabilizing it and creating access routes to it. Taking time with it this feels quite natural to the client. Together, we basically just wait for each new insight and we study the many aspects of the experience. I don't lead this process. I follow it.

I want to give the client time to fully absorb it, memorize it, savor it, learn about it and try it on again and again. The important thing is to integrate it. The client may experience a series of emerging insights. I may simply watch, making an occasional agreeable comment. The client may speak about these insights or she may not. When this missing experience is savored and stabilized, the client changes. The old model is wrong now or at least incomplete. It has to be revised. A core model has enormous implications, on all levels, from physiology to relationship. It takes a long time to integrate. In a typical session, it might take thirty minutes to arrive at the missing experience and another twenty to thirty minutes to savor it. It might take years to fully integrate it.

In order to really stabilize the new model, the person has to use it, in all kinds of applicable situations. Changes like this are integrated, one decision at a time. I have an example. I once did a therapy workshop for a group of Rolfers. One woman, in her process, touched terror. It was set off by the statement, "You're perfectly welcome here." Her terror and fear was based on her model that she was not welcome anywhere. In fact, at the deepest level, she felt that her life was in danger. People didn't want her to be alive. These were the messages she took in as a child and that created these terrifying core beliefs. She screamed with the terror, while several of us held her very tightly (taking over the physical contractions that helped manage her experience of terror – with her permission, of course).

She reported feeling good screaming; it was a relief to let it out. After a while, the terror subsided and her body relaxed. She could finally take in that she was welcome. The people there were all her friends. One after another, possibly for twenty minutes or so, each would very quietly say, "You're perfectly welcome here." She kept taking it in. She relaxed in a very deep way. Finally, she became ecstatic. She had this wonderful, thirty-minute (previously missing) experience of feeling welcome, held, cuddled and loved.

I saw her two weeks later. She told me that, a few days after the session, she was walking down a street on her way to a friend's house and she started to feel uncomfortable. She was thinking, "I didn't call them. They don't know I'm coming over. They're not going to be happy about me just showing up." In the middle of that internal dialogue, she suddenly heard a voice saying, "You're perfectly welcome

here.” She lit up. In an easy, light-hearted way, she continued on to her friend’s house.

Every time she does something like that, every time a choice like that comes into consciousness, every time she chooses an option from the new model rather than the old one, and every time those choices are confirmed, she changes. She grows step by conscious step into this new model. Eventually, the new model becomes habit and sinks back into the unconscious. That’s how people change. They have a new model. They use it, and if it works, it becomes habit.

Empowerment for the Journey

Another very important thing about Hakomi: the beginnings of a basic spiritual practice are built right into it. If you’re a client in Hakomi long enough, you get a lot of practice using mindfulness. You get a lot of experience doing self-study, from a compassionate, mindful place. That’s spiritual practice. That’s a way of changing in a very basic way.

As you begin to distance yourself from your automatic behaviors and egocentric models about who you are, as you calm down and relax, you begin to find another part of yourself, a different level of yourself. As you distance yourself from egocentric habits, you become able to make spiritual choices, about things like ownership and competition. You become more at home in yourself and in the world; more friendly, less stressed out; all just from practicing mindfulness and studying yourself. As missing experiences become part of you, there’s not so much inner noise from conflicted subselves. All therapy helps people move on in their lives, helps them towards fuller maturity and capacity. This method is particularly good for moving people towards and along their spiritual path.

Hakomi therapy is a very good platform for that. One Hakomi trainer, Halko Weiss, says that when the client begins talking about religion, it’s a sign that therapy is over. I’m not surprised that Halko’s clients end up talking about religion. Hakomi is pointed in that direction. The primatologist John Napier asked, rhetorically, “When did man emerge from the primates?” His answer: “The question is really irrelevant. He was there from the beginning.” That is, most of what man is was there all along. The potential for man was there; only a small change, another small step was needed. One could ask the parallel question, when does Hakomi become spiritual practice? I would answer: it was there all along. It was there in the use of mindfulness and in the principle of non-violence. It was there in the focus on here and now experience and the work of self-study. It is still there, in the quest for a loving, spacious and present state of mind. It is there for both client and therapist. It was there from the beginning.

The Evolving Vision

Orientation

I’d like to clear up some of the confusion concerning what the Hakomi method is and what it means to teach it. *Hakomi* is a word that came in a dream to one of my earliest students, David Winter. In that dream I handed him a piece of paper that had the words *Hakomi Therapy* on it. At the time, a few of us had been searching for a name for the work I had developed. We found out that the word Hakomi meant *Who are you?* in the Hopi language. It seemed very appropriate and, because it came in a dream to someone who had no idea what it meant, we adopted it.

Early in the 1970’s, I began to create the techniques and ideas that eventually became the Hakomi Method. I developed little experiments done with the client in a mindful state, experiments like probes. These experiments were done to evoke informative reactions and emotional healing processes. Probes were one kind of such experiments. I also began supporting spontaneous management behaviors by “taking over” the behavior. I took over tensions, voices, holding back and other spontaneous reactions. Tracking and contact were also developed then.

During the 70’s, I first outlined the linear process. In the early 1980’s, the principles were developed with the help of students and co-leaders. This whole body of ideas and techniques became the original Hakomi Method. I and others taught it that way all through the 80’s. Late in that decade, I discovered loving presence and began teaching it as an important part of the method. I left the Hakomi Institute in the late 80’s and continued teaching as a separate entity, Ron Kurtz Trainings, Inc. Since that time, my vision of the Method has continued to evolve.

In my approach, the method has always been malleable and generative of new ideas. Early on, when someone in a training would ask, “How do you “do” Hakomi?” I used to say, “I’m not trying to *do* Hakomi; Hakomi is trying to do me.” This was years ago and back then it was the truth. The work that came to be called Hakomi was almost completely my creation.

During all the years since I began, I’ve never viewed Hakomi as something fixed and rigid. I’ve always and only been doing what inspired me, adding new ideas which came frequently. I’ve always and only been trying to express what delighted my mind and touched my heart. Happily, I have been blessed with frequent inspirations. I have read a lot and have worked with many people, in many different countries. I’ve enjoyed the company of poets, spiritual teachers and scientists. I have known and had support from many, many

Ron Kurtz

loving, bright and generous people. All of them have added to my life and the development of the method.

Once, during the Q&A period after a talk, a woman asked me how I developed the Hakomi method. Recalling that Isaac Newton said, "If I have seen a little further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants," I told the audience, "I stand with my hands in the pockets of giants." It was a joke and it was true. As much as anything else, I took inspiration from those pockets, the pockets of Lao Tzu and Buddha, of Meher Baba, Milton Erickson, Al Pessó, John Pierrakos and Fritz Perls, of Ben Webster, Bill Evans, Edward Hopper and Robert Frost. Every time I teach or do a session, I dip into those pockets.

I grew my own method using that inspiration, using the thousands of opportunities that came, the workshops, the trainings, the hundreds of sessions. Though I did see some great psychotherapists work, I didn't study psychotherapy formally. I cobbled together a new way of helping people, a way that is a unique and personal expression of "*who I am and where I'm coming from*".¹ When I "do" it, it's not simply a method that's being applied; it is a spirit being enacted.

Over the years, that spirit has inspired others. Some of my very first students are now teachers and trainers. Some of the Institute's current trainers were my first students. They loved the work enough to make it their lifelong professions. I'm happy that they did. They have developed their own ways of "doing" it while I have continued to grow and learn and to evolve the work in my way, as they have in theirs. Since that time, we have all taken the original method in different directions.

The original version that began with me continues to be the root of all versions. Using mindfulness and experiments is still essential to all versions. The differences now are in the content of the trainings and the style of teaching. I have dropped a lot of material that I thought was no longer necessary, such as character theory and the sensitivity cycle. I no longer teach the method solely as a psychotherapy. I emphasize learning the skills through experience, practice and feedback, rather than formal lectures. Most of the theory is provided in over six hundred pages of handouts, audio files of talks, and DVDs which continue to be reviewed and updated regularly.

My teaching is characterized by demonstration and experiential exercises. This method is a way to help people become aware of their implicit beliefs and habits. Mine is the method of assisted self-discovery. It's for people who have the courage and capacity to discover how they became who they are. To make Hakomi effective a practitioner must be more than just someone who knows a method. The practitioner must be someone whose very presence can be

¹ Have a look at the Scharmer quote on page 7.

healing, a person who has all the qualities needed to support emotional healing in another. My training reflects and embodies this emphasis.

I emphasize presence, warmth and kindness more than maintaining a professional demeanor. Recent research supports this emphasis on the personal qualities of the therapist. Chögyam Trungpa called it "full human beingness" and described the essential qualities as warmth and wakefulness (quoted in Wellwood, 1983). These are the qualities I look for in students and potential teachers. I believe that any intelligent, warm-hearted person can learn what I teach in a few months. I accept people into my trainings regardless of their academic background. I have taught high school students and seniors, body workers and students of Buddhism, as well as MD's, psychologists, psychiatrists and other helping professionals. They need only be motivated to wholeheartedly pursue the difficult work of understanding themselves and to help others to do the same. Happily this work is done within the warm and loving relationships the trainings foster.

What makes the method work is the practitioner's way of being. In the same way, a trainer's way of teaching makes the trainings work. The changes I have made to the method emerged directly from my impulse to use the greatest warmth and wakefulness I can attain. The spirit I impart to the work is my own. As I grew as a practitioner and teacher, that same spirit refined the method and the teaching, until now, they are one and the same. Here in more detail is how my work evolved from its original 1980's form to the refined method I teach now in 2008.

Since the early 90's, when I resigned as director of the Hakomi Institute, I have continued to refine the method and to teach these refinements in workshops and trainings along with several newer trainers who have trained and worked with me, in a new and separate organization. Some of them, like Donna Martin and Bob Milone, have been working and teaching with for fifteen years or more. This new organization is called "Hakomi Educational Network." Information about it can be found at: www.ronkurtz.com.

Some of the refinements were made as far back as the early 90's and some as recently as the last three months. I'd like to describe the major ones and the changes they made to the method.

The Refinements

Loving Presence. The progression here was this: at first, I thought mostly about techniques, the momentary interventions I'd learned from Gestalt and Bioenergetics. After thinking about these for a while, I began to see how they formed a unified method, the when and how to use the techniques and the theory that made sense of them. After a

Ron Kurtz

while of thinking, teaching and writing about method and techniques, I began to see how they had to fit within the relationship one had with the client. I began to have ideas about what we called *The Healing Relationship*. All of this was part of the development of the original method.

Then, after reading a book called *Human Change Process* by Michael J. Mahoney, I began to see that the most important ingredient—after “client factors such as motivation—he called *personhood* or *therapist personal factors*.

I realized during one mind-opening session that my own state of mind (or state of being) was strongly affecting the outcome of the session. State of mind very quickly became the most important aspect of the healing relationship. I called that state of mind *loving presence* and began teaching it in trainings and workshops as the first and most important element of the method. The workshop was about how one creates that state of mind in oneself. It’s now part of a book being published which I wrote with Donna Martin and Flint Sparks, two trainers of the refined method. Presence refers to attending to the flow of experience from moment to moment (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski & Flowers, 2005).

Using Assistants. I began using assistants in my workshops and trainings back in the 80’s. When I’d did demonstrations, I would have one or two of the observers come and help me with taking over voices and physical management reactions. I have trained many advanced students as assistants and pay them when I can. It’s both a very good way to involve people and to teach them the method through that kind of participation. Since the mid-nineties, I’ve used assistants in my private practice. There are many things you can do when you have assistants that you can’t do when you’re alone with a client. For a while, early in 2000, I would have four clients come at a time, people who knew each other. I would work with one person at a time and have the other three assist me. Then we’d rotate and work with the next person.

Searching for and Using Indicators. Having tracked client’s present experiences for many years, I began to notice and think about the person’s habitual behaviors and qualities that are a regular part of their way of being, qualities like holding the head on an angle, shrugging the shoulders a lot, talking fast, constantly watching me, the person’s default facial expression, and anything that jumps out at me. There are an endless number of such qualities. I learned that these qualities often reflect early adaptations and are the external expressions of implicit beliefs. One of the first things I do when I start a session with someone is to search for these qualities, which I call *indicators*, and come up with experiments we could do with them. I don’t teach character theory any more and consider character traits as just one limited subset of indicators.

The Operational Shift to Holding the Work as Assisted Self-Study. This is the most important refinement of all. I

stopped thinking of the work as belonging within the medical model of treating psychological problems or “diseases”. I began to think of the method as a way of assisting a person in the pursuit of self-knowledge. When this pursuit is successful, relief from the suffering usually follows. Knowing the truth about oneself, making implicit beliefs conscious, recognizing the automatic behaviors of the adaptive unconscious, is the most direct path to changing oneself at a deep level. As part of this shift in perspective, I began to require of clients that they understand the work as self-study, that they be able to enter into mindful states and participate in the experiments that are the vital to the process. I give new clients a one-page description of what they can expect and what they’ll need to do.

Adapting to the Adaptive Unconscious. The adaptive unconscious has come into currency in the last couple of decades. Books have been written about it (*Strangers to Ourselves* for example). In contrast to the Freudian unconscious, it’s much more of a helpmate than a “cauldron of erotic and violent impulses”. It is there to “conserve consciousness”. (For more about this, see cognitive load theory articles on the web!) As I learned about the AU, I began to recognize and work with that part of the mind as it interprets situations and initiates actions and reactions acting completely outside of conscious decisions and awareness. Knowing this, I can understand and respond to a person’s behavior in a more accurate, appropriate and sensitive way, thus gaining a level of cooperation that greatly helps the work proceed. (See Following, below.)

Irritations (Pierre Janet’s Image of What’s Happening). Pierre Janet wrote about events that overwhelm a person, events that cannot be integrated and “made sense of”, events that happen when we’re vulnerable, and especially when we’re young. The emotions and memories of such events can end up, in his words, “encapsulated” in the unconscious. They remain there causing irritation and suffering and influencing emotions and behavior. It is these irritations that our experiments in mindfulness often bring into consciousness. And that’s exactly what we want. Once conscious, with the proper emotional support, sense can finally be made of them and the irritation finally dissolved.

Following (Using Spontaneous Impulses and Behaviors). In keeping with a new awareness of the functioning of the adaptive unconscious, I now see the spontaneous impulses and thoughts that come up during the work as signals from the adaptive unconscious which point the way the work might proceed. When something pops into a client’s consciousness, an impulse or a memory, I will use whatever it is as part of the very next thing to do.

Honoring the Need for Silence by Waiting. One thing that stands out in the demonstrations that I do is the long amounts of time during which I am silent and waiting for the client. Observers frequently comment on this. When I

Ron Kurtz

work, I track for signs that the person is inside: thinking, feeling, remembering, integrating. The signs are simple. Usually the eyes are closed. The head may be turned to one side or nodding. The face may show signs that the person is thinking or having insights. When this is happening, I simply wait in silence. My attention remains on the person. When the person opens his or her eyes, I am present and I wait for the person to speak first. These simple behaviors of mine help shape the kind of relationship the person and I will have. They indicate that I will give the person all the time he or she needs to process experiences. This is especially important when emotions have spontaneously arisen or have arisen in reaction to an experiment I have learned that clients need time to remember and figure things out, to integrate the memories and feelings that have arisen during the healing process. Integration is happening and needs to be protected from interruption. So, I remain silent.

Touching and Comforting. I started many years ago to offer physical contact in ways that are generally frowned upon in professional psychotherapy circles. Of course, they have good reasons for this. The imbalance of power, the privacy of the two-person interaction, the intimate nature of the relationship, all make it quite easy to violate boundaries. When I use touch and offer comfort, it is always in the presence of witnesses, sometimes a hundred or more. Usually, I'm not the one touching the person or holding them. I have assistants do that and always with permission. We touch people, usually gently on the arm or shoulder, at the first physical sign of sadness or grief, signs like tears forming and the voice changing. When we do touch, we're signaling that we're aware of the person's feelings and that we're sympathetic. We also keep silent to allow the person to deepen into the experience. We offer and extend comfort when those same emotions are moving freely through the person and painful memories are being integrated (made sense of), which happens spontaneously if not interfered with. At those times we're either silent or we make occasional comforting sounds.

Implicit Beliefs (acting as if). Beliefs are implicit when they are not recoverable as memories of events. They are memorized procedures. Habits, in other words. They are equivalent to beliefs, in that the habitual behaviors can be thought of as the enactment of rules: "if this, then do that".

They are outside of awareness, not because they are necessarily repressed, they are simply actions that can be performed without conscious attention, thus preserving consciousness for tasks which need time to think about and implement. Like all the habits which are by their nature procedural, they are functions of the adaptive unconscious. Some are adaptations to situations that were painful and/or unresolved. It is these latter adaptations which we help bring into conscious awareness, in order to resolve and change them, thus giving consciousness thought the implicit beliefs they represent.

All these refinements are discussed further in the full text of the 2008 Training Handbook available from Ron Kurtz Trainings. The Handbook has a number of additional ideas as well that are only listed here:

The Six Skill Sets (see page 39 of the 2008 Training Handbook)

Adaptive Unconscious and Procedural Memory (see page 8 of the 2008 Training Handbook)

Moving the Process Forward (see page 62 of the 2008 Training Handbook)

Mental-Emotional Healing (see page 35 of the 2008 Training Handbook)

Letting Things Take Their Natural Course (see the section on Following of the 2008 Training Handbook)

Evoking Healing Processes (see page 45 of the 2008 Training Handbook, Experiments)

Following (see page 57 of the 2008 Training Handbook)

Comfort as Essential to Integration (See Touching and Comforting in the 2008 Training Handbook)

References

- Mahoney, M. J. (1991). *Human change processes: The scientific foundations of psychotherapy*. New York: Basic Books.
- Senge, P., Scharmer, C. O., Jaworski, J. and Flowers, B. S. (2005) *Presence: An exploration of profound change in people, Organizations, and Society*. New York, Currency.
- Wellwood, John. 1983. *Awakening the Heart*. Boston, MA: Shambhala
- Wilber, K. (1995). *Sex, ecology, spirituality: The spirit of evolution*. Boston: Shambhala

*If you want to become whole,
Let yourself be partial.
If you want to become straight,
Let yourself be crooked.*

*If you want to become full,
Let yourself be empty.
If you want to be reborn,
Let yourself die.*

(Lao Tzu, 22 quoted in
Johanson & Kurtz, *Grace Unfolding*, 1991)