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A Psychosomatic Case Vignette

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In this vignette, I wish to illustrate a concept in bioenergetic analysis that I have not seen in our literature. It was told to me by Alexander Lowen, M.D., in a conversation.

The idea is that in skin rashes, energy is blocked from being discharged through appropriate channels and, therefore, partially expresses itself by inflaming and popping out and/or puffing up the skin.

Several years ago, when first starting out as a bioenergetic therapist, I gave a week-end workshop for about a dozen people who were strangers to me. The working format included bioenergetic exercises as a group to start each day, followed by individual sessions with me by volunteers in front of the group.

The second day, a middle-aged man who identified himself as a Catholic priest, requested that I help him with his skin rash. As he stood before us in his bathing suit, the rash was readily discernible as a bright, puffy, jagged red ring of papuled flesh of about three to five inches in width that encircled his neck starting at the base and extending downward onto his chest, back and shoulders.

I was a bit taken aback by his request because of the severe-looking nature of this symptom and the fact that I had never worked with anyone with a skin rash. But I recalled the concept as stated above. I asked how long he had had it, and what kind of treatment he had undergone. He replied that he had had it for more than 20 years and had been treated with topical medications and light, and long-term psychoanalytic psychotherapy. When asked, he said some of the medical treatments had helped temporarily and some not at all, and that the verbal psychotherapy had had no effect. Further, he wondered if it were of a psychosomatic nature. I replied that I thought so, but had had no experience in dealing with skin rashes. I continued that I had a good idea though and would work with him

experimentally. He said he was willing because the rash was bothersome, and he had belief in the psychosomatic view of bioenergetics and had heard accounts of the potency of the therapy.

As we stood talking, I was also observing his body and had made a quick assessment that he was of the rigid character type with some mild oral features that included a ring of chronic tension around the base of his neck approximately underneath the rash. My way of working with him was to keep the rashy area in the foreground of my observation while developing the characterological background and a charge-tension-discharge condition.

Using the breathing stool, to which he easily adapted, I suggested that he let his breathing deepen and release sounds with his exhalation as I assisted by pressure on his chest and rib cage with my hands. Time passed with him slowly but silently deepening his breathing and with me exerting pressure when he exhaled. Then I noticed that when I stopped pressing, he stopped breathing. So I tested this pattern out several times to my satisfaction and pointed it out to him. He acknowledged it, but did not change. As we progressed, his entire head, face and neck, became charged up and reddened; and they blended in perfectly with the rash, making him solidly red and puffy from the lower edge of the rash to the top of his head!

At this point, I asked him to stand up and confronted him as follows: "Father, I see energy and feeling in you that strikes me as having to do with blocked yearning, and I have noticed that as we worked on your breathing and I suggested sounding with it, that you remained silent and waited for me to help you continue breathing, rather than proceeding on your own. Are these characteristic traits of yours, this yearning, this silence and this waiting?"

He answered spontaneously, "Oh yes, they have to do with my life as a priest. My constant attitude is that I am waiting for the end of my life when God will call me to Him and satisfy my yearning to be with Him." I asked, "What do you do in the meantime, do you pray for this to happen?" He said, "Yes." I asked how, and he replied, "Silently." I asked if right now he would be willing to say a prayer out loud to his God including in it the themes of his yearning and waiting. He was excitedly agreeable.

I suggested he raise his arms heavenward in an outstretched manner

and begin. He did, and from him poured forth a most fervent, graceful expression, out loud and full of feeling, a direct statement from him to his God about him being a priest on earth yearning and waiting to be called to his God beyond.

The group members and I stood riveted in this moving moment, and I continued closely watching the redness that indicated the charge of energy and feeling that had been stored and further heightened and developed in him. To my pleasure and amazement, as he began to speak, the puffy redness began to leave his body starting at the lower perimeter of the rashy area. As he continued speaking, the clearing continued, proceeding inexorably upward. The area that was the rash cleared, then the middle of the neck, then the jaw and face, and finally the rest of the head. As his praying came to an end, all the redness and puffiness was gone. Before us stood a satisfied looking man without the slightest trace of a rash!

I chuckled, "Father, I'm not sure if this is a religious miracle or a bioenergetic one, but your rash is completely gone, at least for now." He went to look into a mirror to see for himself. He and the group members were delighted as they inspected his clear skin.

In an attempt to further understand this event and perhaps solidify the gain, I asked him to recall as precisely as he could the onset of the rash over 20 years ago. He said that it had started shortly after he was ordained a priest and began to wear the collar of the order. I asked if he had experimented with not wearing the collar for lengths of time, and he said that he had but that was no help. I stated that he had told me he prayed silently, and now obviously when he prayed out loud, the rash disappeared. I continued, "Does this have any meaning to you?" With a quick look of recognition, he said, "Oh yes, you know I'm a Frenchman from a family whose family and religious manner was to express openly our feelings to each other and to God, but in becoming a priest I joined an English order wherein I was instructed to restrain my emotional display and expression and to pray silently."

Thereafter, my advice to him was to find a way to return to the more open expression of his feelings, if he could, and especially to begin to pray out loud again; and to see if this practice kept him from building up the rash again.