

LS: Interview with Laurie Schwartz-Friedman – 7/7/09
(*Graduate student asked to interview Laurie for her Master's Thesis.*)

MB: Thank you so much for taking this time out. I know you're a very busy person and I appreciate this a lot.

LS: I love educating people about body psychotherapy.

MB: Great! I definitely need educating here. The topic of my master's thesis is surrounding the idea of incorporating the body into a traditional psychotherapeutic session which basically means no touching or not moving around the room. Basically sitting there and talking as in talk therapy.

LS: Using the body as part of talk therapy?

MB: Yes. So what I'm doing is looking at different types of body psychotherapies and saying, "Hey, how can I use what they've learned and how can I bring that into my traditional talk therapy session?" So that's my central theme that I have constructed about 10 or 12 questions around. To start out, I'd like to know a little bit about you. What is your position or title or job description at the Hakomi Institute?

LS: I'm a Hakomi faculty member. I'm a teacher. I'm not a trainer so there's a different hierarchy. You are either a student, certified in Hakomi, which means you've passed the qualifications to name yourself as a Hakomi therapist. And after that you can become a teacher.

MB: To teach future practitioners?

LS: Yes.

MB: You call them Hakomi practitioners?

LS: We can call them students in training. They're not practitioners until they finish certification.

MB: You do call them practitioners when they're out in the field?

LS: Practitioners or therapists. A lot of people refer to themselves as Hakomi therapists.

MB: Ah, ok. Where did you train to be a practitioner and then a teacher? Did you do that at the Hakomi Institute?

LS: The Hakomi Institute is international but the main office is in Boulder, CO. There are trainings all over the world so the teachers travel everywhere to teach from Australia to England to Israel to New York. So it's a method of body-centered psychotherapy but the 20 faculty members teach all over the world.

MB: And you personally, how many years of training did you train with the Hakomi Method?

LS: I started in 1983. I did an intensive for two years. After that I got another three years of supervision. It was about a 5-year process to get certified.

MB: As a practitioner?

LS: Yes.

MB: What about additional training to become a teacher?

LS: That was assisting in trainings for about 2 or 3 years and then co-teaching and then being voted in by the faculty.

MB: Ok, great. The final question as far as your background goes, what other influences do you think have been at work with you to affect your work other than Hakomi?

LS: I started out ... I had the luxury, I guess, of being in the Peace Corps right after college so I developed the attitude in Africa of really being interested and curious in different cultures and in different ways of thinking. Because being in different tribes you can't get rigid because everybody has a different way of seeing the universe. So I think being in Africa opened me up and made me much more flexible to the effect of culture and traditional cultural training on the mind and on consciousness and how people orient. For example, one tribe in Kenya loves fat women and they stuff their buttocks to be fat and it's considered to be beautiful. Another tribe circumcises and they love it and they consider that to be really respectful. Another tribe doesn't circumcise and they consider it shameful. One of the Hakomi principles is curiosity and it really taught me to be really curious and not to project my belief systems onto other cultures which would then carry over into therapy that the Hakomi Method is to really empower the client. Hakomi means "who are you" or "where do you stand in relation to the many realms." So to therapy, much of not diagnosing the client and giving them all sorts of labels and symptoms but finding out what their strengths are, what their passions are, what their intentions are. We're sort of like a mindful midwife for them. We have a lot of techniques to help them to become aware. The emphasis is on love and acceptance and curiosity much more than judgment and psychodynamic evaluation.

MB: That brings me to the first question. What type of student would be attracted to the Hakomi Method?

LS: I think somebody who's involved in the paradigm shift meaning a person who is looking for a therapy that permits love to be part of the process. And a person who also wants mutuality and a non-hierarchical relationship with the patient so they don't have to have power over but it's power shared.

MB: Right. So have you experienced by studying or experiencing the Hakomi Method any kind of personal paradigm shift?

LS: Yes. It's based on mindfulness so it took me out of ... The whole message of Hakomi is, "Can you jump out of your automatic habit patterns?" as if to say we're all programmed automatons. Can you slow down enough to really feel and understand yourself and how you're organized mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and physically, as well as your belief systems. I think the gift of Hakomi is that it brought mindfulness into therapy 25 years ago before mindfulness was even considered popular in this society.

MB: Do you think that is directly applicable to talk therapy?

LS: Yes, I do.

MB: In a Hakomi Method session, how do you view the relationship of the body and the mind?

LS: We say that there is a constant feedback system that's going on between the body and the mind. We have five principles that are the foundations of Hakomi. One is unity which means that we want things to be interrelated. Unity principle would mean there's a connection between thoughts, feelings, images, memories, and beliefs so that there is a wholeness in the body and the mind already. One of the other principles is mind-body holism that we feel that there is a link between thoughts, sensations, feelings and impulses.

MB: Do you name those links?

LS: Yes, we talk to the clients directly about them. For example, if someone came in and they started talking really, really fast and they were very speedy and they weren't really connected to their body or to their feelings, I want them to feel safe so I might let them talk but then I would want to make a contact statement to let them know that I'm listening. And the contact statement would then let them know that I'm really with them because a lot of people, when they come to talk therapy, they don't know what to expect. Once you have a contact statement, the person will slow down and get curious about themselves and then you would give them information like, "This is a therapy that uses mindfulness." We would educate them about mindfulness and ask them if they're interested. And then we might say something like, "I notice that as you're talking about your father, your hands are rotating and moving and rotating" because most people are not looking at the nonverbal signs. We bring attention to the body but in a very peaceful way and respectful way. We might say to the client, "Would you be willing to just feel your hands right now as you're talking and stay with the experience of your hands moving and just get curious about that?" We call that accessing. And if the client is really curious like, "Yeah, why am I doing this?" and they move their hands. Then you might say, "As you're rotating your hands, just take a moment and notice what thoughts you're having now or if you're having a feeling" or "What's happening in your body as you move your hands?"

MB: Do you think the idea about accessing in such a very specific way is one of the Hakomi Method's unique contributions?

LS: Yes.

MB: What do you think the other unique contributions from Hakomi are?

LS: Well they really help the person to get to know themselves in a much deeper, intrapsychic way. So I think mindfulness helps the person develop more intimacy with themselves. I think we're oriented in our culture towards thinking and doing and I think the Hakomi Method helps you come into being and sensing.

MB: Yes. In reading Ron Kurtz' book on The Hakomi Method, when he talks about probes and little experiments, I don't think I've ever read that anywhere else. Is that unique to Hakomi?

LS: Yes. Probes is unique to Hakomi. Taking over is unique to Hakomi. Experiments and mindfulness are unique to Hakomi. Jumping out of the system is unique to Hakomi. The Sensitivity Cycle Map is unique to Hakomi. Studying organization of experience, the mental level of how you're organized is unique to Hakomi. Also, anybody who's doing Hakomi with any other method, whether it's art, movement, dance, you can integrate the Hakomi Method into the creative arts very easily.

MB: I see that. Can I integrate it into a traditional talk therapy session?

LS: Yes.

MB: Because there are definitely parts that I can't incorporate like touching clients. I live in Arizona and in this state there's a very conservative view and basically the message is, "Don't touch." So there are definitely parts of it that can't be incorporated.

LS: Well, you can have the client touch themselves.

MB: Ah.

LS: You can say, "What does it feel like to put your hand on your heart?" or "What does it feel like to put your hand on your belly?" A lot of times, I'll use that kind of touch to form the mother/infant relationship because we all have wounded children inside. A lot of the Hakomi Method works with helping the wounded child feel lovable, acknowledged, and seen. And sometimes children just need to be hugged and held. You can give somebody a pillow or an object and say, "Can you hold that as your child?" Or that's where you get creative and you can say, "Where does the child live in your body?" If she's in your heart, you could say, "Would it be ok for you to bring your hand to your heart and I'll be here with you and her?" Even though I can't touch her directly I can touch her with my voice and my presence and my care about her.

MB: I want to go back to the idea of mindfulness. How do you view using an altered state of consciousness, like mindfulness, in a traditional talk therapy session?

LS: I make mindfulness pretty user friendly. I say mindfulness is the bridge between the unconscious and the conscious. We are constantly repeating habit patterns and in order to study who we are, mindfulness is the bridge. It slows us down to get to know ourselves better. It's not mindfulness like meditation. It's mindfulness like say what happens right now while I'm talking to you on the phone. If I wanted to get more mindful I might say, "Ok, let me take a pause and feel my feet touching the floor, feel the phone in my ear, notice what's going on in my belly and the back of my neck. And you can do it with me.

MB: I am.

LS: Just notice what it's like just to feel your body make contact with the surface you're sitting on. And notice what it's like to feel the sole of your feet touching the floor. And now just taking a pause, feel what it's like to let your body soften or settle into the present moment. (pause) And then I say, "Just notice if there are any places in your body where you're feeling relaxed or comfortable, where there's heaviness or softness, groundedness, and then notice if there's any place in your body where you feel any constriction or tightness." Like for me, I notice I have some in the back of my neck and my eyes. So what's it like to just pay attention to where it feels nourishing and where it feels a little bit constricted. And you're just observing in mindfulness in the present moment what it's like to be in the world of sensation in your body.

MB: Uh, huh.

LS: And now notice if anything changes what are you aware of if we just take this little pause?

MB: What am I aware of? I'm aware of my left elbow which is coming from holding the phone.

LS: Ok.

MB: But I'm also aware of a lot happening in my torso and sort of my tailbone section.

LS: Are you sitting on a chair?

MB: Yes, uh-huh.

LS: And are you noticing any places where you're just feeling some comfort or some relaxation or are you feeling a little bit oriented into feeling so your energy is more in your mind?

MB: Yes, I can definitely feel my consciousness staying centered on the fact that this is an interview and almost like a pull to settle more into the experience and I can feel myself not relaxing totally into it.

LS: Yes, because you also have a time frame and you have an agenda but you could see where if you had time ...

MB: Sure.

LS: and you weren't focusing on the task then we could go deeper into helping you experience what it's like to be in the world of sensation.

MB: I definitely have a sense of that. So the mindfulness, what I hear in your speaking and what I read in the book, is that that happens every session: mindfulness to take one inward to what is present.

LS: Yes, it's because we don't necessarily slow down to witness ourselves. Mindfulness is also called witnessing consciousness. It gets us to a deeper connection into the experience. It's like you can become mindful of thoughts. You can become mindful of sensations. We call this collection of experience. You can apply mindfulness to sensations, thoughts, images, memories, beliefs and impulses.

MB: As you go through this process of mindfulness, you talked about one of the principles early as being unity, how do you describe your connection to your client as you participate in your role as a Hakomi Method practitioner?

LS: My job, I feel, is to stay in mindfulness, to stay really present, to really make sure the client first feels safe, that I know what they're exploring and why they came to me, what their intention is. And then if I see that there's something missing, make a suggestion about something I could do with them with always getting their permission. So it's a dance between what's going on with the client and how I'm meeting them. In the method, I don't know if you saw that, we start with making contact in ordinary consciousness and we bring the client into mindfulness. When they come into mindfulness, we call it accessing meaning. We help get them into mindfulness. That could be by the use of a probe, by going gently, slowly, by staying with curiosity. But we use an access route to mindfulness and the access route can be different for each person. It's like going down into mindfulness into what they're curious about and where the energy is. If they come into a stomachache we might go back into the symptom. If they come in with an issue about a family member, we might talk about the situation. We stay with the client in the present moment. We access into mindfulness about what their intention is. When we get into mindfulness and we deepen into mindfulness by slowing things down. Then we get into what we call the processing phase and that means you're deepening their experience and you're helping them to find core material. Now that could be finding out there's a memory of the child when the child was young and the child was abandoned or something happened in the family. I have someone whose mother died when she was 8 so we're helping her access what did the child do at age 8 to

survive. One of the ways she closed down in her barrier was that she didn't feel lovable. Her brother attacked her so we work with the barrier to help her to have compassion for her child and I validate what she went through. Then I give her the unmet need which would be transformation. Transformation would be finding out as an adult that she did the best she could as a child and what the child might need now is expansion and freedom and permission to dance and move and express herself. So that would be part of the processing. So we do work with the child directly. We have another state of consciousness which is called "riding the rapids" which would be if somebody would go into spontaneous feelings like grief or anger, we help them stay in the feelings. We don't cut them off. When someone is in spontaneous emotional expression or behavior we don't ask them to be mindful. We let it happen organically. When it stops we might say, "How do you feel now?" and "What's going on?" because we want to integrate that. And then when we come out of mindfulness, we want to help them integrate and complete what they went through. So the process of Hakomi definitely has stages. Now it doesn't mean you go through every stage in every session. I have a client who had to come in and talk to me for many months. He had been invaded by UFOs and he was terrified so he never wanted to go into mindfulness. Mindfulness, for him, was terrifying. We don't go into mindfulness if the client doesn't feel safe.

MB: So would you call him delusional or was he schizophrenic?

LS: He was just very traumatized and hyper vigilante. He didn't trust and really needed somebody to talk to and I guess feel the calmness and be able to get his feelings validated by me.

MB: Are you familiar with Ken Wilber and his book, "Spectrum of Consciousness?"

LS: A little bit. We require that in the Hakomi training.

MB: So using this idea of where people at different levels of consciousness from the psychotic to the neurotic to the intellectual to the spiritual realms, do you see a restriction on that whole spectrum of who could benefit from the Hakomi Method?

LS: According to Ron Kurtz, the people who could benefit from Hakomi are the people capable of mindfulness. He wouldn't apply Hakomi to psychosis. I happen to have had mental illness in my family in drug addiction and alcoholism so I do apply Hakomi to these situations. Not for them but for myself. The more I can stay in mindfulness, the more I can have a boundary and I don't get so triggered.

MB: I've worked specifically with people with drug addiction and alcoholism. Do you think the Hakomi Method is effective with the person with these types of problems?

LS: I work with addicts after they have a good 12-step program ...

MB: Ah, ok.

LS: but I think if you do it before they have sponsors and resources and 12-steps, it can overwhelm them and make them want to use because it's just too much affect.

MB: After they've been sober for awhile and you're saying, already established in sobriety?

LS: Yes. And if they're interested, I have a lot of clients who just love it because they feel like it gives them a connection to a higher power.

MB: Ah, sure.

LS: I'm also trained as a massage therapist and I'm trained in biodynamic cranial-sacral therapy and the Alexander Method so I have a license to touch. You're talking about not touching but you can use mindfulness without touch and you could say, "Just think about when you're feeling peaceful and when you're feeling nurtured and what is your connection to higher power." You can say to somebody, "See what it looks like. What's your fantasy of a completely nurturing safe place where higher power is present and you feel like *temenos*, like a sacred sanctuary. Like a resource sanctuary." Sometimes I'll say a place where you feel safe and it's your creation and you can bring in whatever you want – people, plants, dogs. It's completely your creation and it's a place for you to feel safe and to be nurtured and to be supported. They'll tell me their whole image whether it's in the woods, by the beach with their grandmother. After they go into the image of what nourishment feels like, what safety feels like, whatever their issue is, then I'll say, "Now stay in your body and tell me what's happening in your body." So we switch from image to sensation.

MB: Do you ever find a problem doing that?

LS: No, never.

MB: Because I didn't know if somebody had abuse issues from their childhood, if that would be triggering for them.

LS: Well you're not asking them to go into trauma. You're asking them to go into nourishment. So you're saying, "If they had an abuse issue, would it be hard for them to go into their body?" And then they would say, "They don't feel their legs." They might not feel everything. They might say, "I feel nothing" and it might just stay as an image. They give you information like maybe it's not safe.

MB: Right. Are you aware of any research that relates Hakomi Method either to talk therapy or similar topics?

LS: There is a woman named Amelia Kaplan and she actually did her doctorate on me. We won two awards. She went to Harvard as an undergraduate and Greg Johanson sent her to me. She decided to use me for her doctorate so I basically taught her the Hakomi Method but I integrate it with trauma. The thesis has a lot of dialogue in it and then we

have permission to share the video tapes and in it she talks about my treatment plan, the developmental level, the trauma level, the character level, the spirit-dream level, and then she describes the cases with dialogue which she analyzes the transcript.

MB: So I assume this available on ProQuest or another database?

LS: We were trying to get it onto Good Therapy so people could get it from Good Therapy. We're definitely willing to share it. We just haven't put it out there.

MB: I'm just trying to determine how I could get a copy of it. I can go through Good Therapy? What is that? A database?

LS: Good Therapy is an organization for therapists. You have access to lectures and stuff. You become a member. If you give me your email, I can ask my assistant if she can send it to you. We also published two articles that are much shorter.

MB: And where are those articles?

LS: One of them is from the USABP (United States Association of Body Psychotherapy) Journal.

MB: With Kaplan as the author?

LS: Well, we did it together. But I'll ask my assistant if she can send them to you. So what are you doing now? Your doctorate? Your master's?

MB: I'm doing my master's thesis. I did my internship in a local agency and realized there were lots of restrictions on how I could do therapy in that very traditional setting. I've taught yoga in the past and have had several different kinds of body-centered practices. I'm definitely a physical kind of a person so it just seemed like a natural place to see where the body is in therapy. I'm finding the research to be appalling thin in this area.

LS: Yes, it is. First of all, you have to get two licenses to touch like a massage license. A lot of people don't want to go to school and get two licenses. If they're not a nurse or a physical therapist, they can't touch. If people go for clinical psychology it's 4 or 5 years and the dissertation. By the time they're done, they're tired and they don't want to spend another \$10,000 for touch training. That's a lot of devotion to incorporate touch and the body.

MB: It seems like touch is kind of a fearful thing for a lot of people.

LS: Well, actually I think just the opposite because I've been touching for 30 years. I think touch brings safety much deeper because most people never felt love and contact gently. So if you touch somebody and it's not invasive and they had permission and you ask that permission to touch, for me, touch is the only thing that made me feel safe

because I dissociated because there was so much trauma as a child that if somebody made eye contact with me I wouldn't even believe they were there. I only believed somebody was with me when their hand was on me because my parents disassociated and they never paid any attention to me. But for me, someone touching me means paying attention to me. I just come from the opposite place. And for me, eye contact was dangerous because it meant I'd have to abandon myself and take care of you because I was so hyper vigilante that the only way for me to survive the trauma of my mother was to tune into her. Most of my therapists I tuned into for years and they liked it. Nobody ever caught me on it. That's the advantage of mindfulness because if you're just in talk therapy and the therapist lets you talk and talk, most of the clients are just trying to please the therapist. And then Hakomi teaches you, who are you? Where are you? What do you need? What are your unmet needs and wants? So mindfulness, I think, makes the transference and countertransference less traumatic or the potential for mistakes is not as great. You can't argue with mindfulness.

MB: Did you ever have anybody trick you into saying they were mindful and they weren't?

LS: You can catch that. You can feel it when they're there and when they're not there. Because it's slower, more introverted, it takes time to kind of feel it

MB: Well, Laurie, I appreciate this interview so much. I do have a final question. Is there anything central to the Hakomi Method or to your experience that hasn't been covered?

LS: We talked about making the client feel safe, about the first thing is contact and having them experience what their intension is, going through mindfulness, into accessing and deepening and processing into what we call core organizing beliefs giving them the experience of transformation and then bringing them out into integration and completion. There are two types of consciousness that aren't mindfulness. That's the child consciousness and riding the rapids and we do name them as different from mindfulness. Riding the rapids is strong, emotional release. And working with the child is sort of like if somebody becomes young, age 3, 4, or 5, we talk to them like a child. We bring the child into the room and we help them have a relationship between the adult and the child. A lot of addiction, I agree with Pia Melody, the cause of all addiction is childhood trauma so then we want to know what the child went through and we want to validate the feelings of the child. Then we want to find out what the child needs now. And sometimes they need, like in Pia's model, they need to get back the feelings that they're carrying from the previous generation. In Pia's model, in The Meadows, is they need to know they're precious and lovable. Ron Kurtz might use a probe, "You're lovable just the way you are." He uses a probe just to find out how you feel about that. If you're in mindfulness and somebody says, "You're lovable just the way you are." If you can take it in as nourishment, like it warms my heart. My body relaxes. I might see an image of my grandmother holding me. If you don't believe it, you're lovable just the way you are, your jaw might tighten. You might say that's bullshit. You're just saying it because you're the therapist. I guess what I'm saying is that we do a lot of self study in

mindfulness. There's also a technique in Hakomi that involves touch. If somebody is tight, we take it over for them. If the shoulders are tight, we might say, "Exaggerate that. Let us do that for you." You can always have somebody bring a friend into the session and have the friend do it for them. A lot of Hakomi sessions, people will come in with a friend to sit with them and do the touch piece if the therapist can't touch.

MB: Ah, that certainly would work.

LS: That's the creative way to have somebody feel intimate and close. I noticed when I did Hakomi process groups it was great because people could volunteer to do it for other people and I would just be orchestrating it.

MB: In groups, do you have people work in dyads?

LS: If they're practicing, they can work in dyads. But if they're getting a therapy session, then everyone is watching you give the session. You can integrate Hakomi with a lot of other tools; psychodrama, group process. The basic method is very specific. The core principles of Hakomi are mind-body holism, unity meaning everything is related to everything, the mind, the thoughts, the feelings. We try to get everything communicating to get the whole psyche connected. If somebody doesn't have feelings and they're always going to thoughts and images, I might bring them into feelings. But if they're always in feelings and they never have thought then I might want to bring them into thoughts to establish unity like psychic and whole unity. And then we have the concept of organicity in which the answer is within the client and it's like we're going on a journey with them. We're sort of like a midwife for them. We're not there to have control or have an agenda or label or diagnose but we are there to empower and help them heal. One of my therapists said he felt like Hakomi was a unity of consciousness in healing. In a lot of therapies, healing comes with touch. In Hakomi, healing can come from the therapist being in loving presence and the mindfulness becomes the healing experience. Even without touch you can have healing. And then there's the Hakomi principle of nonviolence which means going with the grain, helping a person feel safe and nurtured. I'm also trained in trauma work so that's another whole other conversation. How you use trauma with the body.

MB: Where did you do your trauma training?

LS: After Hakomi, I did Somatic Experiencing with Peter Levine's people. And that was because a lot of clients that are frozen in fear that are disassociated need a lot of practice coming into their body.

MB: Right. I saw that in my internship.

LS: When there's trauma, there's frozen fear or energy that's disassociated or frozen over-coupled so that's a whole other method of how you bring the person into the body. Again, you don't have to use touch but you have to teach them how to resource.

MB: To resource:

LS: Resourcing would be translated into the world of sensation so before you ever talk about the trauma, you want to help the person find out where they're empowered, where they feel safe and grounded and maybe contained. How can they feel empowered? We don't want to work with any trauma unless the client is really feeling empowered with resources and grounded and contained. All of that is taught. All of that is really something you teach them.

MB: I think those are all of my questions and thank you so much for such thoughtful answers and being just such a full partner in this interview. This has been wonderful.

LS: You know the one thing I said when I got the award for the best doctorate at this conference in 2005 was that I'm grateful to Ron Kurtz and to all of my Hakomi trainers because love was considered an option as being a therapist. You were given permission to love your clients. That's a complicated word, love, but it means that it doesn't have to be so clinical. It does mean you use your mind but you can bring your heart there.

MB: I get it.

LS: Ron has a unique way of incorporating heart and mind in helping people study themselves. If you love a client and you don't have mindfulness, they can become pretty dependent on you. And then you get scared because the transference is so deep that they want to jump into your body. But if you love a client and you help them to love themselves because they can enter mindfulness, they can put their hands on their belly and they can experience feeling loved and experience knowing that all of their feelings are welcome. And they can experience knowing that they're being respected by you and valued by you. One of the best things from my clients is when they confronted me on something and I admitted it, that I made a mistake: that I didn't have to be perfect. That was a big thing for clients in building trust. And most of my talk therapists, it's like they always had to be perfect. When you're traumatized, it's hard to trust people who have to be perfect. Nobody's perfect. So that was the other thing. Just the humanity in the Hakomi Method.

MB: And I think that's easily transferable.

LS: Yes, and I think it attracts people that really are in the paradigm shift of sharing power and mutuality, more of a feminine model.

MB: Perfect!