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The Influence of Elsa Gindler

Judyth O. Weaver, United States

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Dr. Weaver has developed her own integrated manner of working, which she calls "Somatic Reclaiming," and frequently presents her work at conferences and teaches at workshops and trainings at Esalen Institute in California, and in Japan, Russia, India, Taiwan, and Canada. She has written a wide variety of publications and also has a private psychotherapy practice in Seattle, Washington.

Her background in somatic work and Body Psychotherapy includes a range of trainings. She began studying after returning from three years in Asia, most of these spent in a Zen Buddhist monastery in Japan, and she later integrated this practice with Tai Chi and Sensory Awareness, which she studied with Charlotte Selver and Charles Brooks beginning in 1968. She was certified by Selver to teach in 1983. She is also certified as a Somatic Experiencing Practitioner, in Biodynamic Craniosacral Therapy, and in Prenatal and Birth Therapy. She is a Rosen Method practitioner and senior teacher; and a master teacher in Tai Chi Chuan, which she has been practicing since 1968. She also trained with, and had a deep friendship with, Eva Reich from 1984 until her passing in 2008.

Introduction

Elsa Gindler (1885–1961) might today be considered as a grandmother of Somatic Psychology and Body Psychotherapy, despite never being a psychologist or psychotherapist. As a young woman diagnosed with a severe illness, she had worked by herself to try to heal, and in order to explore possibilities for her regeneration and health, she began to give her complete attention to what was happening within herself at every moment in every activity during the entire day. A devoted student, colleague, and friend, Elfriede Hengstenberg explained, "She found that in this practice she came into a state where she was no longer disturbed by her own thoughts and worries. And she came to experience—consciously experience—that calm in the physical field [Gelassenheit] is equivalent to trust in the psychic field. This was her discovery, and it became basic to all subsequent research" (Hengstenberg, 1985, p. 12).

Gindler had studied "Harmonische Gymnastik" originally with Hedwig Kallmeyer, but in teaching it she eventually felt that the fixed set of common movements for everyone was a narrow approach. She wanted freedom for people to explore independently and to develop individually—a way to experience and learn from one's own somatic behavior in all of life's situations. Her work developed, offering opportunities for each person to become more aware of what was happening in their own organism. In her classes, she did not teach "techniques," and eventually she changed from using the word "exercise" [Übung] to "experiment" [Versuch]. The natural activities of everyday

life were the material for her classes. Gindler's focus was *tasten;* in English, we would say, "sensing our way."

By 1913, Gindler had developed her way of working with relaxation. Attention to the breath was basic: "For her breathing was a teacher: simply being attentive to it is a way of learning how things are with one, of learning what needs to change for fuller functioning—for more reactivity in breathing and thus in the whole person. She did not teach others what they 'ought' to be, but only to find out how they were" (Roche, 1978, p. 4). About her work of being present, Gindler wrote only one article: "Die Gymnastik des Berufsmenschen" [Gymnastics for Working People], which appeared in the journal of the Deutschen Gymnastik-Bund [German Gymnastik Federation] (Gindler, 1926). She never gave a name to the simple, deep processes in which she led her students. Charlotte Selver, one of several disciples who brought Gindler's work to the United States, says that the closest Gindler got to a name was "Arbeit am Menschen"—"working with the human being," though others think that was just a phrase that was used about her work. Gindler lived her entire life in Berlin. She never advertised her classes, yet over the years her work spread and has had a far-ranging influence in many fields, in particular that of psychotherapy.

In 1925, Elsa Gindler met the experimental musician and educator Heinrich Jacoby. After studying with each other, they collaborated in the development of what is now sometimes termed the "Jacoby-Gindler work." Jacoby had a great interest in psychoanalysis, and through him Gindler became interested and referred her students to the work.

Influence on Psychotherapy in Europe

Gindler herself had many students who were involved in the psychotherapeutic field. Clare Nathansohn began studying with her in 1915, and when Clare married Otto Fenichel, a student of Freud, he also began studying with Gindler. Clare Fenichel said of her experience, "I got my husband to go, too, and he was very interested. Later on he would have me talk to his psychoanalytic groups about the Gindler work, and then we would all discuss it" (Fenichel, 1981, p. 6).

With reference to Gindler's interest in psychotherapy, Clare Fenichel said, "Psychoanalysis spread at that time and some of her pupils were into it. One of them was my husband, and there were others. Gindler was interested to see what was going on and she learned. From then on she said things in class that she could have said only if she considered mental activity as an important matter much involved with movement." Fenichel goes on to say, "She knew more and more about human beings. And this is the important thing; she became more and more interested not just in the body but the whole being. She said, 'If you don't want to get over the rope, don't be surprised that you can't make it.' She noticed that something that is not 'body' gets the body going. And that 'something' effects the function of this body" (Ibid., p. 8).

Wilhelm Reich never studied with Gindler, but it seems he was influenced by her approach in several ways. After the Reichs left Vienna and moved to Berlin, Annie, Reich's first wife, studied with Clare Fenichel. Reich's daughter Eva remembers the many Sunday picnics of the close friends, the Reichs and the Fenichels, where her father would assiduously question Clare about Gindler's work. "Now, tell me, what is it that you do?" he would ask (Reich, 1984).

Elsa Lindenberg, Reich's second "wife" and long-term companion, studied with Gindler both before and after the Second World War. She also studied with Clare Fenichel while she was living in Norway with Reich. Eva Reich felt that the vicarious knowledge of Gindler's work and the direct influence of Lindenberg definitely had an effect on her father's becoming much more aware of his psychoanalytic clients' breathing and body state, movement and positions while working with them (Reich, 2001).

Influence in Other Fields

Gindler's work also gave many other people the depth and connection for which they were looking. Ruth Nörenberg, who came to Gindler after she had studied gymnastics at the Loheland School, said, "It soon became clear to me, however, that the Gindler work was not just 'Gymnastik' in the usual sense, but was an education of the whole human

being, a 'Lebens-Schule' (school of life) as she [Gindler] called it" (Nörenberg, 1981, p. 20).

She wrote about her work with Gindler:

> Through our experimentation I managed, slowly and painfully, to work myself out of a number of holes, by gradually coming to a fuller understanding of the deep sense of Elsa Gindler's teaching—until I found the path to myself. This process was not unlike a psychological "depth analysis" (of which, however, nothing was known at that time) even with respect to the subsequent "catharsis," the clearing up of inner disorders. I gradually learned to be more in charge of myself, to understand myself better—without falling into those unproductive and crippling feelings of inferiority that so easily deteriorate into depressions.
>
> The unity of mind, body and spirit was much discussed at that time. There, in Gindler's classes, we experienced it in practice. And a clear consciousness of this has never left me. (Ibid.)

After the war, Nörenberg became a physical therapist and felt she was able to work in the spirit of Gindler.

For others, the Gindler work fulfilled a different need. Else Henschke-Durham had many physical problems when she came to study with Gindler at the age of eighteen. She had been working with small children and difficult or disturbed older ones of working parents. Durham relates, "Under Elsa Gindler's guidance I became aware that the organism was not just a machine to be used, that there was a way for me to become familiar with it, to relate to it, to allow it to function according to its own needs. What a revelation! . . . With incredible persistence, Elsa Gindler made me aware that unneeded contractions . . . were brought on by my mental attitude. My holding was a defense" (Durham, 1981, p. 17).

Durham was encouraged by Gindler to go to the United States, and, in 1934, opened a studio in New York. Like so many other Gindler students, she received referrals of medical and psychoanalytic patients and worked with them very successfully. In 1941, she married a European psychiatrist and psychoanalyst. Durham wrote of the times: "Interest in psychoanalysis was just spreading but often even deep psychoanalysis did not free a person from the physical tensions that had developed through repressions and negative resistances; here was an area left out. So we worked together. Analysts came with their personal needs, and then sent their analysands" (Ibid., p. 18).

Many others developed their understandings and enhanced their careers from Gindler's work. Lily Pincus, author of *Death and the Family* (1974) and co-author of *Secrets in the Family* (1978), among other books, studied with Gindler from 1928 to 1939. First a social worker, and then a family therapist at the Institute for Marital Studies in the Tavistock Institute for Human Relations in London, Pincus describes Gindler's work as helping her students to "harmonize body, intellect and feeling through self-awareness" (Pincus, 1981, p. 32).

In her article "From Dance to Psychotherapy" (Heller, 1983, pp. 3–8), Gertrud Falke-Heller describes how Gindler influenced her transformation from a famous dancer and dance teacher to an occupational therapist who was able to work with both neurotic and psychotic patients. After leaving Germany, she worked with the Kurt Jooss dance company in England and as "Teacher of Relaxation" at the Crichton Royal Hospital, with shell-shocked soldiers and others suffering from neuroses, psychoses, schizophrenia, and asthma. She eventually taught at Freiburg University and later at the Lindauer Psychotherapy Conference.

Heller's student Dr. med Helmuth Stolze, developed his psychotherapeutic process based on movement as inner experience and called it "Konzentrative Bewegungstherapie" [Concentrative Movement Therapy]. Stolze eventually taught with Heller and later with Miriam Goldberg. Stolze's description of KBT (CMT) sounds very reminiscent of Gindler when he says that it "cannot be systematized into exercises. Its application is, rather, of an intuitive character, obedient to the moment . . ." He goes on to say,

> In the inquiry into what a man is in his very self, the therapist must be able to experience himself and, over and over again, make himself ready for the experi-

> ence. A therapist who is "insensitive," who is too "deaf" and "dumb" as to what is going on, who has "no taste of" and cannot "smell out" his patients is not capable of working . . . only a therapist who is entirely "present" in "readiness for experiencing" can be effective in this therapy. (Stolze, 1983, p. 15)

Many of Gindler's students throughout Europe have had a profound influence on other modes of working with people. Gindler's longtime friend and colleague Elfriede Hengstenberg had been certified to teach "Bode Gymnastik"; in 1920 she also received a teaching certificate from Gindler. Hengstenberg worked with children, preferring to work together with their parents when possible. She preferred to begin work with the mothers prenatally, and afterward to continue working with the children's parents and teachers as the child developed. She also gave workshops for the Hungarian pediatrician Emmi Pikler, who after the Second World War established an orphanage. There, at Lóczy, Pikler showed how supporting natural development in the child's own time—and on his or her own initiative and independent experimentation—also facilitates mental and emotional development (Pikler, 1994).

Moshe Feldenkrais, developer of "Awareness through Movement" and "Functional Integration," now more commonly known around the world as the "Feldenkrais Method," was also influenced by Gindler's work through his studies with her close colleague Heinrich Jacoby (Feldenkrais, 1981).

Influence in the United States

One of the most important inspirations for Somatic Psychotherapists of many persuasions has been that from Charlotte Selver (1901–2003). Selver was a graduate of the Bode Gymnastik school in Munich, and had done graduate work with Mary Wigman, a pupil of Laban, in Dresden, before she came to study with Elsa Gindler in Berlin in 1923. Following her studies with Gindler, she emigrated to the United States in 1938, and settled in New York City, where she offered classes and private sessions in the "Gindler work." Selver coined the name "Sensory Awareness," "to single out the awareness of direct perception, as distinguished from the intellectual or conventional awareness—the verbalized knowledge—that is still the almost exclusive aim of education . . ." (Brooks, 1974, p. 232). In 1958, Charles Van Wyck Brooks began studying with Selver. They eventually married, and in 1963 he began teaching with her.

During her early days of teaching, one of Selver's most ardent students was the prominent psychoanalyst Erich Fromm. In 1955, Fromm and Selver gave a joint lecture at the New School for Social Research, entitled "On Being in Touch with Oneself" (Roche, 1999, 2000).

Clara Thompson, who co-founded the William Alanson White Institute of Psychiatry (with Erich Fromm and Harry Stack Sullivan), was also one of Selver's students, as were many other of her colleagues at the institute. Betty Winkler Keane was a very successful actress when her psychiatrist, Thompson, recommended that she take classes with Selver. Keane, who eventually collaborated with Jungian analyst Edward Whitmont (he worked at the verbal and she at the nonverbal level), was one of the first of Selver's students to begin teaching. Keane worked in New York City, weaving together Jungian analysis with acting out dream sequences and the work of sensing.

Fritz Perls, one of the twentieth century's most influential innovators in psychotherapy, was deeply influenced by Gindler's work. In the early 1930s, Perls was a patient of Wilhelm Reich, and Perls's wife, Laura, was a student of Gindler. Both Fritz and Laura, the developers of Gestalt Therapy, later studied with Selver in New York—Fritz very extensively and also privately. In 1947, Perls gave a talk at the William Alanson White Institute entitled "Planned Psychotherapy," in which he said, "I recommend as necessary complementary aspects of the study of the human personality at least three subjects: Gestalt psychology, semantics, and last but not least, the approach of the Gindler School" (Gregory, 2001, pp. 14–17).

Alan Watts, the popular proponent of Zen Buddhism in the West, studied with Charlotte Selver, and they presented many workshops together in New York and California. He

introduced her to the Esalen Institute, the newly founded center for the study of human potential in California, and in 1963, Selver presented Esalen's very first experiential workshop. Over time, her teaching there brought about a great breadth of contact and influence within the psychotherapeutic community in the United States.

Many have been influenced by the work of Gindler and Selver and have incorporated it into their own modes of psychotherapy. At Esalen, Seymour Carter studied Sensory Awareness with Selver and Brooks, and Gestalt Therapy with Perls. He taught there and in Europe for years. Marjorie Rand, an international trainer of Integrated Body Psychotherapy (IBP), also acknowledges the influence of Sensory Awareness on her work (Rand, 2001). I began intensive studies with Charlotte Selver and Charles Brooks in 1968, eventually integrating Sensory Awareness into her form of Somatic Psychotherapy that she calls "Somatic Reclaiming."

Other Influences

Gindler's work has also traveled to the East and influenced therapists and counselors there. In 1972, at the Esalen Institute, Professor Hiroshi Ito, the first Japanese counseling psychology graduate from the United States (1948), participated in workshop sessions in Sensory Awareness with me. Returning to Japan, Ito reformed his teaching and created "New Counseling," which included the practice of Sensory Awareness and eventually the Alexander Technique.

Peter Levine, creator of "Somatic Experiencing," who uses fine somatic tracking in his Body Psychotherapy work to resolve shock and trauma affect, cites a workshop taken with Charlotte Selver in 1968 that had great influence on his work. Doris Breyer, a student of Mary Wigman and a professional dancer, studied with Gindler before coming to New York in 1942, where she worked and trained with Alexander Lowen. When she moved to California, Stanley Keleman studied with her and also referred many of his clients to her (see Chapter 21, "The Maturation of the Somatic Self" by Stanley Keleman).

Other Gindler students came to the United States to live and teach and had significant influence on different modes of work with children and adults in both creative and therapeutic processes. Carola Speads was Gindler's teaching assistant from 1925 to 1938. Speads brought her work to New York and, for a time, shared a studio with Charlotte Selver. Speads called her work "Physical Re-education" and had a very successful practice until her death in 1999. Susan Gregory, a Gestalt therapist, recital artist, and former opera singer, was Speads's student from 1963 to 1995 and calls the Gindler work "an essential part of Gestalt therapy's historical ground" (Gregory, 2001).

Other areas of expression and creativity have also been influenced by the work of Elsa Gindler. Mary Whitehouse, creator of "Movement in Depth," also known as "Authentic Movement," studied briefly with Selver and Brooks, as did Mary's students Joan Chodorow and Janet Adler. Aligned with Jungian Depth Analysis, Chodorow's work is focused in the context of analytic work, and Adler's is developing with particular interest in mystical experience.

Although the "Rosen Method" is not considered a psychotherapy, or even a Body Psychotherapy, its founder Marion Rosen felt she was influenced by Gindler's work through her teacher Lucy Heyer. Even though there is no record of Heyer studying with Gindler, Rosen felt she had been strongly influenced by Gindler and has carried that into her own work. Lucy's husband, Gustaf, was a psychoanalyst; the Heyers were part of a group in Munich that was using somatic methods in conjunction with psychoanalysis. Rosen studied with Heyer for two years before leaving Germany. She relates:

> During this time I became very familiar with the body and truly admired how it was put together. That knowledge complemented what I was seeing in the work that Mrs. Heyer's husband was doing with psychiatry; I began to see how they worked together. The Heyers used massage and breathing to open people up and make it easier for them to get in touch with their problems in psychotherapy. They found that this way of treatment was much shorter and more effective. (Rosen, 2003, p. 3.)

Here again, the Gindler work was used as an adjunct to psychotherapy. Eclectic psychotherapist Claudio Naranjo says:

> Psychotherapy as a healing modality has changed and evolved . . . Despite not fitting the description of psychotherapy, Marion Rosen's approach suggests ways of meditation-in-relationship using skillful touch. It is clearly related to earlier approaches to emotional healing—notably Reichian work—that allow the person's deeper self to emerge by assisting in the dissolution of "character armor." (Naranjo, 2003, p. ix)

All of Gindler's students worked in their own individual ways. Mary Alice Roche was a director of The Lifwynn Foundation for Laboratory Research, which promotes the work of Trigant Burrow, the first American-born psychoanalyst and founder and onetime president of the American Psychoanalytic Association. A longtime student of Sensory Awareness, researcher and editor of many bulletins of the Charlotte Selver Foundation (later named the Sensory Awareness Foundation), Roche says:

> . . . [Gindler] offered them the possibility of being responsible to themselves in simply finding out how it is, and how it wants to change. This is one way her work was, and still is, different from all "systems." In that early article she was already saying, "Each student is working in his own fashion. That means that each one in the class is working differently . . . The student begins to feel that he is in charge of himself . . . His consciousness of self is heightened." (Roche, 1978, p. 4)

Roche also suggests that:

> . . . it was the genius of Elsa Gindler that the path she opened led, not to some preconceived ideal she had set for her students, but to a continually unfolding discovery of their own unique way of being. Since no one can really copy another's way of being, no student could copy Gindler in any other manner than by becoming ever more himself or herself. Teacher and student worked together, growing in their own ways, toward their own innate power, their own creativity. (Roche, 1983, p. 1)

Implications for Psychotherapy

Elsa Gindler's process of attending fully and exploring all the basic, natural activities of life has had a profound influence on a wide variety of people and applications. Without being a method or a technique, Gindler's approach has made a huge impact among many psychotherapeutic disciplines.

The uniqueness Gindler looked for in her students is just what we hope and work for with our clients in psychotherapy—to help them uncover their connection to and faith in their own innate beings. Without a sense of this in their own organisms, physical and sensorial as well as mental and emotional, the wholeness of the human being we are working with will not feel complete. Focusing on the experiences in their bodies, their senses, the somatic elements of a person's consciousness supports them to stay in the present and work with the reality of what is happening—to work with the actuality of the affects. To be grounded in and support them to experience and work from their inside out allows the organic processes to return to their natural balances.

Somatic inquiry, essential to so many integrated psychotherapeutic approaches, especially when working with pre-verbal and other deep issues, instructs the practitioner how to work at depths and with delicacies without projecting or interfering. The clarity of Sensory Awareness leads both the therapist and client in working with all aspects of the client's direct experience. The Somatic Psychotherapist is thereby supported to be less directive, as the client is allowed to discover and claim his or her autonomy.

Used within therapeutic sessions as well as integrated in psychotherapy, the simple, basic work of sensing, derived from Elsa Gindler, is one of the essential and vital foundations of the field of Somatic Psychology or Body-Oriented Psychotherapy.

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