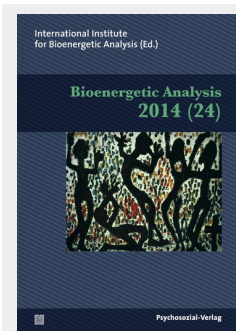


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A Core Energetics Approach to Negativity



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A Core Energetics Approach to Negativity¹

Odila Weigand

“There is a creative and unifying principle, towards which move all living creatures. Many honor it as God. I honor it as the God which every human being is in its Essence.” (John Pierrakos, *Core Energetics*, ch. 19, p. 216)

Body therapy, I believe, needs no longer to be known as an alternative therapy, it must occupy the proper place it conquered by its potential in helping people and by its capacity of dealing with past events through body experiences in a much more effective way than using only symbolic processes.

Core Energetics is a process for life and healing that utilizes body approaches and goes beyond the scope of many therapy methods. Core Energetics is a powerful evolutionary therapeutic approach that seeks the integration of all aspects of our humanity: emotional, physical, intellectual and spiritual. It is a very useful tool for growth and for understanding interpersonal relationships, revealing the emotional and energetic processes at the root of our feelings, thoughts and behaviors.

I have been a Reichian therapist for 18 years. I began to study Reich with a group that originated the Wilhelm Reich Association of Sao Paulo. Afterwards I completed my training in bioenergetics, and in 1986 I became a local trainer of bioenergetic groups. I have learned basic bioenergetics as a way for personal growth and to help others with Dr. Lowen and presently I am studying and deepening my understanding with Dr. John Pierrakos.

For the first 10 years after I began to study Reich and Lowen's character structures and character resistances, whenever I tried to apply this theory in sessions with clients, I felt blocked. I could not believe that pointing out their problems to them would help them change. What I mean is I could know the theory but I felt something was missing

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in terms of body work to really be able to help people change through an approach that would combine understanding, dissolving the character attitude and promoting new behaviors. I could even teach about characters. But when I tried to use the theory in therapeutic sessions, I felt blocked and what I found myself doing instead was to increase the flow of energy and try to dissolve the energy blocks through breathing, movement, expressions of feelings. To a certain extent, this produced good results.

In 1989 I attended a workshop with Bennett Shapiro, a Bioenergetic Analysis trainer from Vancouver. He had developed a deep comprehension of negativity published under the title “Giving the Devil his Due”. Finally came an instrument to work bodily with character traits. He also introduced the concept of mask, and behind it, actually the opposite of the mask, could be found what he called the devil. For me, this workshop was very important since for the first time in many years of therapy I was introduced to negative parts of myself with an accepting attitude, not a critical one. The proposition of the body work was to recognize, honor and energize my negative traits. This I could do, feeling valued and recognized myself.

In 1994, John Pierrakos began the first training group in Brazil. I began my Core Energetics training, concluded in 1998. I felt comfortable re-learning character structures in the training. I felt I could work with myself in depth, deepening those areas that were new to me in the body psychotherapeutic universe but which I felt resonated as profound truths within myself.

- Energy and Consciousness as the base for life and feelings. No more “stay out of your mind to be with your feelings”.
- The will to love as the base for inner peace and contentment as well as for lasting love relationships, not pleasure in and for itself.
- The explanation of our soul’s choice of the family we are born into, according to the difficulties we need to overcome in this life span, viewing our soul’s evolution as the primary motivation to resolve our conflicts. (Pathwork Lecture 34 – Preparation for Reincarnation). Seen in this light, the limitations imposed by our character structures can be seen as opportunities for growth, no more as an unfair joke played on people at random, either by fate or god.
- The model of “mask”, “lower self” and “higher self”. Learning to differentiate between mask feelings and lower self feelings meant a big insight for myself and my work. Learning that mask feelings and attitudes are a part “stolen” from the higher self, which is over utilized to cover our well hidden negative feelings (Lecture 43 – Three Basic Personality Types: Reason, Will, Emotion). Learning to recognize when I am in my mask by the perception of a quality of “deadness” in the contact, a lack of vitality, no matter how nice or sound the words or ideas. This perception leads to an awareness of other people’s masky interactions.

- How to enliven the mask and bring out lower self feelings, attitudes, covert behaviors, by energizing them.
- To make contact with my own and other people's higher self, in the first place, sets the ground for a safe exploration of our lower selves. The higher self is the starting point as well as the final objective. We depart from a loving place, travel through anger, hate, pain, fear, horror, shame, knowing that we can always return to that safe place where connectedness can be restored through our heart's yearning to love and be loved.
- Learning about the life task gave meaning to an almost ever-present disquiet within me. The life task, as I see it, presents itself as a sequence of tasks to be accomplished and overcome. This disquiet is what pushes me to reach out from a comfortable accommodation within familiar patterns, toward new more innovative ways of promoting growth. It was the motor that pushed me into seeking Core Energetics training.

John Pierrakos had been formerly Alexander Lowen's partner in the creation of Bio-energetics. When they parted, John developed his work in the direction of integrating spirituality in therapy, researching into the relationship of energy and consciousness, energetic fields, positive and negative energies and the meaning of evil.

John Pierrakos, on his search of spirituality, found St. George and the Dragon whose figures became the symbols of the study of positive and negative powers. Both are inseparable, the Saint on his white horse and the Dragon. In order to reach spirituality we need to integrate our Dragon instead of killing it.

I consider this concept of utter importance. I felt it was useless simply to attack character traits. The resistance became impregnable, I used to lose contact with the client, who then tried to understand intellectually the process in order to cooperate, which again resulted in resistance. Or he made endless efforts in order to change himself.

Today we have in our hands a technique to work with the body in character analysis. The question is how to make the MASK (the un-energetic outer layer) conscious and to express the TRUTH of the second layer (the lower self) where the energy is stored. This energy is tied to negative feelings, and we need to reach them without increasing defenses. We need to ally ourselves with the client. In releasing the energy held in the mask, we expand ourselves, it is a pleasurable experience. We need to ally ourselves with these denied aspects of the self, which the mask strives to hide, to include, not to exclude them. "Evil, actually, derives not from negative feelings but from the denial of feelings, both positive and negative. Every block, every disease, every feeling that is non authentic is a denial." (J. Pierrakos, 1987, p. 214)

From the point of view of psychotherapy, evil or the character are derived from the relationship with parents, either in uterine life or after birth. The spiritual view however is that our character or our negativity is the heritage we are born with in order to work and to transform it during our lifetime. Let's remember that Psychology means 'the study of the soul'.

Character structure is a paradoxical formation in its nature. Why? Character structure has the function to preserve life, but in doing precisely this, it creates blocks to the flow of vital energy in the organism. This paradoxical entity, the final result of our painful or frightening childhood experiences, in the beginning was created to save us, but later became a killer of our life energy. Now it becomes a big NO expressed in our muscular contractions as well as in our belief system.

This apparently contradictory dynamic, leads us into a serious search for our inner truth. "Deadly orgone energy generates negative beliefs. Lively, moving, vibrant energy in the body generates life-promoting beliefs. Reich taught us this relationship. In Core Energetics we learn that the reverse is also true: negative beliefs sustain energy stagnation and maintenance of blocks. This means that moving energy from its encrustations in body blocks is not enough for change. Therapy needs to clarify and explore the negative beliefs underneath body blocks." (J. Pierrakos, 1987, p. 158)

Years ago, when I began working with Reichian therapy, the prevalent idea among many body psychotherapists was that stagnant energy was something, as Reich taught, that created and maintained rigidity, blocks and character traits. We should make every effort to dismantle these traits and at the same time do body work in order to break down the armor and in so doing discharge negative energy. From the ruins, a pure and loving being should appear – the genital character – as idealized by Reich.

Long years of clinical experience have shown a different reality. Under the rigidity of character there are unexpected frailties. Instead the pure being, capable of giving and receiving love – the genital character – appeared from the ruins of our scars, our incomplete or undeveloped parts, failures, a vacuum, where development has been arrested.

A client of mine, a beautiful woman, had a cold and distant father, who had never looked at her with love. She never knew what it feels like, when you are 3 or 4, to be seen as a very precious person, as a most beloved daughter. Her father never looked at her at all. As a teenager, when she became an attractive young woman, her father never glanced at her. Her mother, when they had a quarrel, would stop talking to her for as long as 5 months. She froze. In therapy, when she worked with "reaching out", saying aloud, "I want", "I need", the energy flowed but she needed the warmth and containment of the therapeutic relationship, in order to thaw the ice. Being touched, being seen, receiving support were experiences that did not exist in her early life. They were new experiences. For her, freezing meant life, while seeking for affection took the meaning

of death. If she kept open, seeking her father's affection, this would be her death. This perception was quite true in this family. Her sister had less luck, she became psychotic.

We take a significant step in the advancement of therapy when we understand that the energy which sustains and feeds the character is something positive. The objective of therapy is to put this energy in movement and transform it and no more simply discharge it either cathartically or otherwise. Before this understanding, when therapy succeeded in dismantling the character structure, this was when big problems arose. We used to believe in dismantling, in cathartic processes, in discharging the energy that gave support to the character trait. In the process of therapy, this meant lots of suffering, depression, long periods of confusion, inability to work, dilution of the limits of the ego and of the identity, sensations of death, and even illness in some cases. Panic, so frequent these days, is the result, I think, of sudden collapse of the energy, which sustains rigid structures of defense, revealing undeveloped parts of ourselves.

To rescue the energy invested in negative attitudes is an ecological approach.

What Is This Thing Called Negativity?

Imagine a child with very authoritarian parents, a child for whom any sign of rebellion provokes bursts of anger. This child learns that the best way to survive is submission to parental will. At the same time it creates a barrier against the invasion of the parents in its internal world. This barrier built with repressed fear and anger will become a big NO to the flow of life, because its structure is a chronic contraction. It will hinder communications. In the future the person will not complain in therapy of his internal NO, but instead of timidity, of fear of rejection, he will complain of not being understood, of people saying he is aggressive even when he does not mean to be aggressive. This happens because we are in contact with the inner side of our mask. Others can see the outer side, where our anger filters through the tone of voice, rude gestures, or a cold look. If you ask a service from this person, he will hear you with attention and will probably be willing to do whatever is asked, without even checking with himself if he wants to do it or not. Inner contact with himself and with his own needs has been distorted. Fear of rejection stops him from saying NO and so his YES does not come with full involvement. He will make great effort but at the end will find a way of failing to do the service, or at least to do it incompletely. Or, in sexual intercourse just before orgasm the woman may ask her partner: "Are you sure you turned off the kitchen lights?"

The point I want to explore in this paper is the understanding of how LIFE – flow, expansion, contact – took the meaning of DEATH, and how DEATH – block, freeze, withdraw – took the meaning of LIFE.

Wilhelm Reich perceived that Evil in our culture tends to be segregated and associated with sexual and destructive impulses.

At this time of our evolution as a species, an important task is to redeem this segregated energy and reintegrate it in our lives. Reich understood this process of Evil and of Emotional Plague, but collided with the Plague in his own life. Today we know that dissolving resistances is more effective than fighting them. In my understanding this process follows some steps:

1. Perceive the paradox: the same pattern that in early life meant survival, today suffocates.
2. Recognize the effort developed in order to preserve life.
3. Value the negative forces which have been sustaining the effort up to now.
4. Re-energize this system instead of trying to eliminate it.
5. Integrate this energy and direct it to a constructive objective. Create new constructive beliefs associated with new objectives.

Evil is the result of a distortion of vital energy that turned against itself. Evil came to be associated with the devil, with lower parts, with the dark. Excluded from the consciousness, it created a territory of its own. Where? Could it be that to exclude something from consciousness is tantamount to expel it from ourselves? Unfortunately not, we did not get rid of Evil. We could only put it far away from conscious perception. Where? In our body. This territory of Evil became the blocked and segregated region below the diaphragm – in the abdomen, in the pelvis and also on the back. Lowen says we are living our truth when we are in contact with sexual energy whose seat is in the pelvis. The Easterners teach that the center HARA is the seat of body vitality and governs sexual health.

So, if the pelvis is the seat of evil, there resides also the source of life and pleasure. This “evil” needs to be freed, we must rescue this energy and reinvest it with its original meaning -- lust for life.

It sounds good in theory, but to explore this territory is the last thing we want to do, because we fear the darkness, where projected shadows took the form of monsters in childhood imagination. These monsters haunt us, but they are the guardians of our more vulnerable and less developed parts.

The Dragon In Our Unconscious

Joseph Campbell in “Power of Myth” says that we use to think that the Ego is in the center. It is a mistake. The image of evil, the snake which tempted Adam and Eve, the Dragon, are associated with the darkness and sexuality in judeo-christian civilization.

Saint George killing the Dragon is a constant action in our life. It never ends. It represents the conflict between consciousness and unconsciousness. Says Joseph Campbell: “Psychologically the Dragon represents the attachment of oneself to one’s own little ego. We are prisoners in our own dragon cave. The goal of therapy is to set free the forces of our center.” (Campbell, 1990, p. 150)

The Chinese Dragon is different: it represents the vitality of the swamps and emerges thumping its belly and roaring menacingly, says Campbell. The Chinese Dragon has an adorable quality, it liberates the generosity from the waters.

But the Dragon, for us, differently from the Eastern culture, inhabits a stagnant swamp, a region associated with energies and material from the abdomen (the masochistic swamp, stagnation). Sometimes the Dragon hides himself in a cave from where it roars menacing those who approach. Have you ever seen people with these attitudes? When the feeling of vulnerability is about to emerge, the person transfigures himself and becomes menacing? He shows the Dragon in order not to show the hidden softness of the heart, though the heart, like the princess imprisoned in the cave, craves for freedom.

“Therapy Is About Love. Love Is What Cures” says John Pierrakos. The Prince fights the Dragon to free the princess. In old histories the Dragon should be killed. In modern versions, the Dragon would withdraw and must not die anymore. It could be made the guardian of freedom, a helper of the princess, who represents the heart.

Negative Becomes Positive When Energized!

This is simple but it changes a great deal the way of understanding and doing psychotherapy.

When we are born, we are all love. That is why babies, and even new-born animals, so often awaken love feelings, they open our hearts. We remember the time before we closed our hearts. In time, we begin to create a protective layer – we needed it as children, but presently this protective layer has become our very identity. This layer is created by our frustrations which turned into anger, fears transformed into inhibition and shyness, abandonment turned into sadness. There we store jealousy, arrogance, disdain, irony, bitterness, greed, destructive competition, exhibitionism and hate, which is but frozen anger.

But if I showed myself openly with all these traits, no one would like me and, more important, I would find myself very ugly. So we build up a socially acceptable façade – amiable, helpful, the image of sweetness. Or else the mask of the tough guy who can not cry, or the serious person who works all the time.

The essence of each human being is always beautiful. It has vibrating force, pulsates in a very rapid rhythm. This quality is love. John Pierrakos, in studies with Kirlian photos showing human energetic fields, discovered that the second strongest emotion is hate. As you can imagine, the first is love.

When We Want To Deal With Our Negative Parts, First Of All We Must Recognize And Affirm The Beauty We All Possess: The Beauty Of The Soul

We carry in our unconscious a primal fear that hate can surpass love and destroy everything, as said Melanie Klein. We need to build faith in basic goodness, the perception of the loving being within us, before activating the forces of negativity.

We have two interesting questions related to therapy:

How these two protective layers operate (the social layer or the mask and the second layer, the negativity layer)? And what is their function?

First – How? By creating chronic contractions, which stop the undesirable manifestations and by giving a different, more acceptable direction to our feelings. For instance, a person says with complaining voice how “everything goes wrong, nobody recognizes me”, and so on. Underneath this socially acceptable victim role, anger, bitterness, destructivity as well as a profound fear of loving feelings exist in hidden form. This person is cruel with himself and with others because he does not permit pleasure for himself and robs the pleasure energy of others.

The second question follows – What is the function of the protective layer? The contractions hinder the flow of energy, and diminish the intensity of the impulse. This same person, when excited, could manifest virulently his hate. He can be explosive or destructive, through mordacity, for instance. As soon as he has discharged the hate, he comes back to his victim role. From this position he expects to gain sympathy, to feel himself cared for while he hooks others into trying to solve his problems. They will never succeed, but the victim at the end will be triumphant and all the others will feel drained. We are tempted to attack this behavior, maybe even become irritated with the person and try to make him change. Fearing abandonment the person will make efforts to comply, inhibiting the complaints. But keeping quiet, the person gets depressed, because his way out is now blocked, he gets stuck. His throat gets constricted in order not to speak, the breath gets shorter in order to restore the energetic balance, since now the path of discharge through complaining is blocked.

The person can even blow up, act in inadequate ways and feeling guilty as a consequence. Or else explode in a symptom, a more primitive way of discharge than the

complaining. All this happened frequently when, using Character Analysis, we had only the resource of interpreting or showing the person what he was doing.

Now, what can we do? We can energize these two parts – the external one, the social part, in general submissive and “good”, as well as the internal part, which is secret, powerful, triumphant, that part which savors its triumph in secret, which secretly gloats and thinks “nobody will catch me”, “you are not going to win over me”, “you are not going to be successful by helping me”.

Reich taught us the initial comprehension of the paradox which forms the character structure, but it was at first with Ben Shapiro in Bioenergetics and with John Pierakos, creator of Core Energetics, that I could find at the end a satisfactory answer, a technique to deal with this question. This is done without hurting nor humiliating the client, without arousing resistance – which many times emerged as somatic symptoms, because the characterological way out was blocked by the interpretation.

This is a consciousness work, the client’s conscious participation is essential.

The energy of negativity is the very thrust of life. Whenever blocked, frozen, and distorted, it turns against itself taking some devilish form.

“No matter how actually ugly some of these manifestations may be – such as cruelty, spite, arrogance, contempt, selfishness, indifference, greed, cheating, and many more, – you can bring yourself to realize that every one of these traits is an energy current that is originally good and beautiful and life-affirming. By searching in that direction, you will come to understand and experience how this is true specifically; how this or that hostile impulse is originally a good force. ... You have to fully acknowledge that the way the power manifests is undesirable, but the energy current that produces this manifestation is desirable in itself. For it is made of the life stuff itself. It contains consciousness and creative energy. It contains every possibility to manifest and express life, to create new life manifestations. It contains the best of life.” (Pathwork Lecture 184 In Thesenga, S., 1994, p. 250)

Let us illustrate with the story of Laura. She is about 30 years old, in a group session. She had had considerable therapeutic work before, she has grown as a person, has a good job, good income, and a loving boyfriend who wants to marry her. But Laura gives herself no credit for what she has achieved and lives her life anxiously, willing to flee from all that is happening in her present life.

In a group session, Laura asks to work with her difficulty in accepting the changes in her life, including the perspective of marrying her boyfriend, who already has a comfortable economic situation.

Therapist: What phrase expresses this problem?

Laura (first phrase): “If I feel pleasure in life, I die” (erroneous childhood belief).

The therapist asks Laura to ground in order to energize the legs and the pelvis and to repeat the phrase with an expression of force, making use of the tennis racket to mobilize the aggressive energy blocked in her back.

Then the therapist suggests a second phrase: “I won’t have pleasure” (to own unconscious negativity). Where did the therapist find the phrase? In the first phrase, but now the patient must put herself as an agent, taking possession of her own existence.

The patient must keep grounding and repeat the phrase “I won’t have pleasure”, mobilizing the aggressive energy in the back with the racket. (For this woman who needed to strengthen the back, the tennis racket was used, but for other clients we might suggest other therapeutic acts like wringing a towel or the falling exercise or kicking).

Now the therapist suggests that she bend over to ground and to integrate the meaning of the negative phrases into the lower body and consciousness.

While bending over, the energy goes down and flows through all the body. The negative energy has been mobilized. We can now go to the phase in which we energize the desired path, redirecting the energy constructively.

Therapist suggests (third phrase): “I open myself to pleasure”. Laura tells what comes to her mind: “I jump into the abyss of pleasure”. Laura’s phrase expresses her sensation of dying if she defies that part which said: “If I feel pleasure, I die”.

Reich showed how death anxiety appears together with pleasure anxiety. The therapist asks Laura to energize the negative phrase, repeating with strong voice and using at the same time the racket. She must keep grounding and keep repeating: “I jump into the abyss of pleasure”, as she beats with the racket.

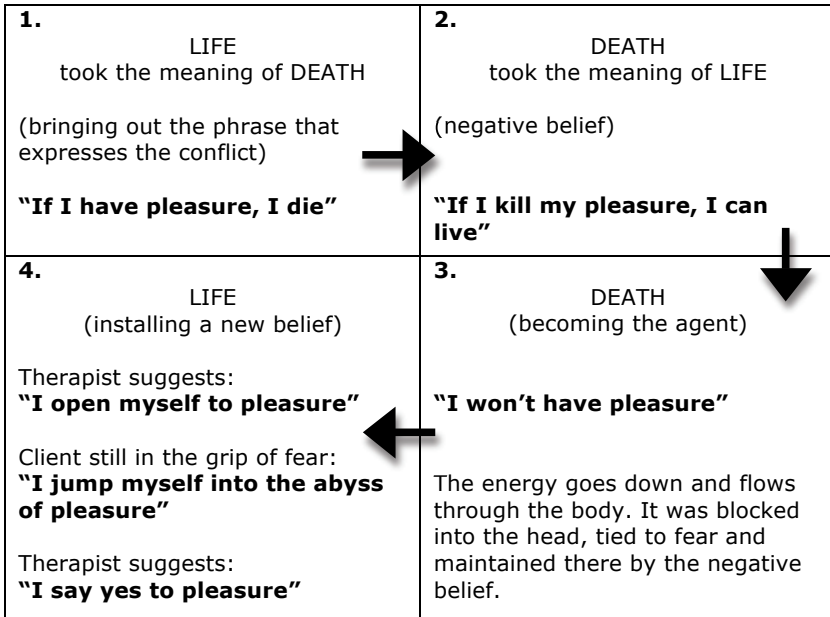
The therapist suggests a fourth phrase: “I say yes to pleasure”. After taking possession of negativity and expressing fear, this new phrase can be energized with the tennis racket. The energy has been channeled *through* the conscious ego and not surpassing the ego. The movement is now fluid, beautiful and gracious, the body opens itself and shines.

To end the exercise, ground bending over in order to integrate this energy, now associated to a new meaning.

The pleasurable expanding movement seen in Laura’s body is now connected to the vitality of the organism. As a child she had learned that expressive movement meant death because she felt threatened if it expressed pleasure. So in the child’s mind a change happened: what was life turned to be death. The child learned that she could survive if she could avoid pleasure.

How does the thrust for life turn into fear and destructiveness?

The child, when frustrated, in a first movement rebels and tries to express anger. Feeling scared, she has to inhibit this outward movement. She does it by contracting



her muscles, holding her breath and “keeping inside” the aggressive movement of reaching out.

The change occurred: energy spent in life preserving aggressive movement (reaching out and protesting) is frozen into contention, in order to preserve life. It used to be desire for life, aggressive movement outwards, the base for our movements to conquer what we need. Aggression is progression, is energy moving upwards in our back, moving outwards through the eyes, mouth, arms and legs. That is what moves us forward in life.

In this child, what used to be life, took the meaning of death (to express myself, to be who I am). What used to be death took the meaning of life, of survival (hold in, keep inside, submit). At the same time there occurs a change of meaning that accompanies the change from expressive movement into a chronic contraction. Movement is de-energized, the energy is spent in maintaining the block. The thought, “if I express myself, I will be abandoned and I die” keeps this dynamic and the primitive, childish fear, maintains this dynamic repeating itself throughout life. This is called by Freud repetition compulsion, we used to call it character resistance. It is the compulsion to recreate the childhood wound.

We need to understand and reveal these unconscious dynamics. We must energize these negative and silent thoughts and feelings, give them voice, energize their

expression, putting the energy in movement. It is of no use to pray to God to free us from temptation; that is the same as trying to exorcise, to exclude. We must energize and include.

If we energize these negative parts, the energy thaws and is transformed into life flow again. Then we can direct this flow to energize new images, thoughts and feelings that are more adequate, favorable to life.

Thoughts and feelings are conditioned by energetic factors – charge, discharge, pulsation, intensity, grounding, centering. If the energy is held and transformed, it generates thoughts, feelings and acts literally distorted. Somehow this distortion is also visible in the body. For instance the pectoral muscles, that take part in breathing, also have the function of reaching out for what I want and keeping away from me what I do not want (to give limits). This muscle takes part in the torsion of the arm too. When chronically held, shoulders and arms will be restricted, as well as breathing.

Summary

In this paper my objective was to propose a way of dealing with Character Analysis, using body work associated to verbal work, in order to deal with muscle and character blocks at the same time. I show how to bring out the unconscious meaning contained in energetic blocks, put it in phrases, energize life-negating phrases, substitute these for life-affirming phrases and put energy in these new life affirming phrases. Blocks are considered a NO to life, and consequently a form of negativity.

A child is born as loving energy, unprotected. Facing a hostile environment, all this loving, positive energy, or even aggressive energy (a child's demand for warmth and contact, fight for life, cry in order to get food, and yell when not attended) all this energy is frozen, stopped, distorted.

Negative energy is but positive energy of love (contact) and aggression (progression, work, knowledge) that turned against itself. This occurs in the development of the child and even of the teenager, but adults also create blocks.

Let us review the steps to work these delicate dynamics, avoiding new wounds to the client:

1. Make contact from therapist's loving core to client's loving core. The client must feel recognized and realize he is good, capable and valuable.
2. Recognize and energize the form and the speech of the mask.
3. Give voice to the unconscious negativity which in general says the opposite of the speech of the mask. Energize this part. Take responsibility for it.
4. Once negativity has been mobilized, consciously owned, we can access the

- vulnerable feelings of the wounded child, or the tender feelings and love from the heart. Or else the internal force that comes from the aggressive energy aimed for life. When a child is born, it needs holding, acceptance, mirroring. We can create a new belief that takes the place of an old one, and reinforce this new belief. For instance, believing that holding, acceptance and mirroring can be found in our present lives, even though they were not found in childhood. There are various possibilities of working for the cure. As the client is very open, a therapeutic environment offering support and protection is necessary.
5. The path to spirituality leads us to lovingly recognize and integrate our unacceptable parts: the cruel, evil, invasive, victim personage. We must include and not exclude these parts.

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This paper was written after the conclusion of the five years training in Core Energetics with John Pierrakos, finished in October 1998, in the city of Brasilia, Brazil.

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