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Introducing Sensory Awareness to War Veterans

A report by Lee Klinger Lesser

Ever since the United States entered Iraq, I have felt heartsick thinking about the impact on the lives of the people in the military and the people in Iraq. So many soldiers are the ages of my own son and daughter. I vividly remember Vietnam, when I was the age that my children are now. Soldiers came home with the trauma of their experiences to receive the anger and hostility of much of the country. I wondered who I would be if I lived through war. How would I incorporate the experiences? I have deep tools at my disposal, forty years of practicing Sensory Awareness and thirty years of meditation, and I cannot imagine how I would find my way. Thinking about the sons and daughters of other mothers, many entering the military straight out of High School, I wanted to find a way to contribute to their journey home and to the realization of the goals they hope to achieve.

Our S.A.F. 2010 Workshop

We are looking forward to this year’s Foundation sponsored workshop. Our title is Reclaiming Vitality: The Practice of Sensory Awareness. It will be held at Vallombrosa Retreat Center in Menlo Park, California from August 6 to August 8. The convenient location of this peaceful facility situated near Stanford University will enable more people who wish to commute to do so. We very much hope you will be able to join us.

CEU credits are available for M.F.T. and L.C.S.W. psychotherapists, and we now are currently in application to offer these for massage therapists as well.

For 2011 our S.A.F. Workshop is scheduled for the weekend of April 15-17 at Vallombrosa Retreat Center. Please save the date.
2) We will not only continue offering an annual S.A.F. conference/workshop in California, but we will actively explore how we can help create similar types of Foundation sponsored workshops to be offered in other regions outside of California.

3) We will enhance our website to include changing quotations on our home page related to Sensory Awareness. These quotations will be renewed biweekly. We will also install audio and (hopefully) video segments of classes of active leaders onto the website. These also will be renewed from time to time. In this way visitors to the website can get an immediate taste of Sensory Awareness, and can return at a later date to get a different taste.

4) We will establish a Foundation presence on Face Book and Twitter in order to attract many more new people to our website and to the work offered by leaders.

5) We will use our April 2011 S.A.F. conference/workshop not only as an occasion to honor Charlotte Selver’s 110th birthday, but also to utilize it as an opportunity to further develop our fundraising efforts.

S.A.F. Board Retreat

By Richard Lowe

In April the Foundation Board met for a much needed weekend retreat in San Rafael, California. Over the last year the Board has lost two long serving members (Lee Klinger Lesser and Stefan Laeng-Gilliatt) and has gained three new ones: Terry Ray, Sara Bragin and Ray Fowler. In addition our Board meetings have evolved into shorter, but more frequent telephone conference meetings.

Thus this retreat provided a way for us to meet face-to-face and delve more deeply into issues facing the foundation, and clarify what the Foundation’s most important priorities should be. The weekend was both intense and productive, and it built upon the strategic planning process the Board went through in 2008. A quite useful element in our work together was the occasional brief “break” times spent experimenting a la Sensory Awareness both together and alone. These “breaks” helped us all be more grounded and present, and ultimately more effective in dealing with the important issues at hand.

Here, in brief, are a few of the major projects we decided to pursue in the near future:

1) We will begin the important job of documenting how current leaders are using and have used Sensory Awareness in their work with people. We are particularly interested in how this work has been used with different populations (for example, people with chronic pain, convicts, teenagers, war veterans, etc.).
The Board members are united in agreement that the Foundation needs to continue to find ways to help support the development and success of leaders, and that we need to pursue more effective ways to interest new students in this work. We feel we are actively and creatively approaching these goals.

It is fortunate that we have such dedicated Board members. Their commitment to the practice of Sensory Awareness helped make this retreat a productive and rewarding experience. As a result of this retreat we are more focused and more energized for the challenging work ahead.

**PLEASE NOTE:**
We have changed our membership policy. Starting this year membership begins when the donation is received and continues for one year from that date.

**President’s Message**

I am happy to announce that Ray Fowler has recently joined other new members Terry Ray and Sara Bragin on the S.A.F. Board. This April the full Board met face to face for the first time for a retreat as is described in the previous article. The intense process we went through at this retreat has emboldened us to be more creative and aggressive in our efforts to promote Sensory Awareness. Our most important projects are described in the article. We are open to any feedback or questions you may have about them.

Joining our newly established advisory board is Don Hanlon Johnson. Don is writer and teacher of Somatics and a former student of Sensory Awareness. He currently teaches at the California Institute of Integral studies and the University of Kyoto. Last year an interview with him was printed in our Newsletter.

The foundation continues its focus on promoting the work through sponsoring annual Sensory Awareness workshops, and by actively working with the Leader's Guild. By putting on such workshops and helping sponsor the Leaders’ Guild conferences which precede them we attempt to create more opportunities for dialogue between those who are leaders. We feel such an effort is essential for advancing the growth and nurturing the depth of Sensory Awareness. Past conferences have, in fact, proven to have benefitted the Guild’s own development and have also helped the S.A.F. better understand their members’ needs and concerns.

This Foundation is dedicated to awakening public interest in this valuable study, but we need your support to keep us going. Please consider how you might help us insure the future of Sensory Awareness. Please don't forget to renew your annual membership and also consider a donation when you can. Call or email our office if you are unsure of your membership status. As a S.A.F. member you will not only support our many important projects, but you also receive discounts at future SAF conferences and sponsored workshops, books, publications, and CDs. Perhaps even more importantly your membership helps us all stay connected as a community. Our sense of community and working together are very much in the tradition of this work.

Sincerely, Richard Lowe
S.A.F. Executive Director

PS. Sensory Awareness has entered the 2001st Century! Check us out on Face Book and Twitter.

**Sensory Awareness Foundation**
**Board of Directors**
Sara Bragin
Sara Gordon
Ray Fowler
Richard Lowe

**Advisory Board**
Russell Delman
Norman Fischer
John Travis
Don Hanlon Johnson

**SAF Newsletter**
Editor: Richard Lowe
Send your comments to: Richard Lowe, P.O. Box 0411
San Rafael CA 94915; email: richlowemft@yahoo.com
The deadline for the next newsletter is October 31, 2010.
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23 Wallace Way, San Rafael, CA 94903
www.sensoryawareness.org
What I have to offer is the practice of Sensory Awareness, which has been the foundation of my own life. I did not know anything about military culture, nor whether there would be any interest in Sensing from returning veterans. I began talking more and more to veterans, reading books, watching films, and networking with veteran's organizations. My own ideas and assumptions have been continually challenged and tossed aside, as I meet and connect with more and more young veterans. Somehow, I keep trusting that if people can land in their own sensations and connect with breathing, it can offer refuge and tools for finding a way home.

A friend, Chris Fortin, who is a Buddhist priest, therapist and mother, was also looking for a way to contribute. So, we joined together and began speaking with veterans and veteran's groups to see if there was any interest in what we could offer. The San Francisco Zen Center, where Chris and I both lived during the late 1970's and early 1980's, also wanted to help. They became our fiscal sponsor. We have held 10 one-day events combining adventurous physical activities with meditation and mindfulness. We have also held two camping, whitewater river rafting trips.

The interest has continued to grow. At each event, I share sensing experiments. I talk about Charlotte and how sensing has been a part of my life. I open to discover how to share these tools using language and experiments that are most relevant and accessible to the veterans who are there. The vets themselves inform and shape what we are doing. As part of their introductions:

One said: "I am in school. And right before I took three final exams, I sat down and cleared my mind the way we did at the last event. I sat for 5 minutes and this is the first time in my life I got 4.0." (I asked him if he had ever meditated before and he said "No." He was the first vet to speak.)

The very last vet to speak was a man with a very serious and angry demeanor. He said, "I was at the last event. And when they started the breathing stuff, I thought it was very corny. In fact, I thought it was fucking retarded. I drive a lot. Hundreds of miles. And a few days after the event, I was driving on the highway and I thought of the breathing. And I thought what the heck...so I tried it. And it worked. Instead of being so uptight about how far I had to go, I could say to myself, 'I'll get there when I get there.' And I could see what was around me."

Here's more information about this program:

Honoring the Path of the Warrior is a program that assists post-deployed veterans in making a positive transition from military to civilian life. The project began in the Spring of 2008, as a project of the San Francisco Zen Center in collaboration with Swords to Plowshares, Vet Centers, Campus Vet Clubs and the VA. Since it began, 95 veterans have participated in 10 one-day retreats (and two overnight whitewater rafting adventures) combining trips to the beach, hiking, and rock climbing with mindfulness, meditation, Sensory Awareness, writing and art.

Vets participating in the program gain mindfulness-based skills that are both practical and accessible. Mindfulness-based interventions have proven to be successful at managing stress, anxiety, and trauma in a number of diverse populations and are being used within the VA system for returning veterans and soldiers being deployed.
How You Can Help:
The program is free and depends upon donations which directly support the participation of veterans in the program. Donations are well leveraged due to the project’s relationship with San Francisco Zen Center, which provides organizational support and advice.

Donations are tax deductible and may be sent to:
San Francisco Zen Center Veteran’s Project
c/o Kate Frankfurt
300 Page St. San Francisco, CA 94102

The program’s goal is to apply these powerful tools through activities that are meaningful and relevant to veterans. These tools assist in healing and well-being through:

- Learning mindfulness practices that reduce stress and enhance life skills in everyday situations
- Engaging in fun, challenging and adventurous physical activities
- Building community with other returning veterans

This program creates an opportunity for veterans to come together and step out of often lonely and isolating situations. Energy and vitality are renewed through participation in physically and mentally challenging activities. Mindfulness tools are provided that require a level of concentration and awareness that is both foreign and familiar. This process helps veterans honor their own strength and build a bridge for the journey home.
Thank you Stefan

It is with much gratitude that the Board of the Sensory Awareness Foundation thanks Stefan Laeng-Gilliatt for his many years of dedicated and conscientious service as both our Executive Director and as a Board member. We are sad that he has decided to leave the Board to move on and pursue other interests. It is a great loss.

Without his dedicated efforts and creative skills the Foundation would probably not still be in existence today. We owe him a great debt.

During his tenure as the Foundation’s Executive Director his integrity, technical know how, gentle manner and good sense of humor helped keep things moving along remarkably well.

We are most pleased that Stefan has expressed his intention to be available to help the Foundation from time to time when the need arises and when he is able.

Along with many of you we send him sincere best wishes for his future.

NOTE: The board was able with the help of Lee Klinger Lesser to obtain a special Sensory Awareness sitting stool handmade by Charles Brooks and give it to Stefan as a symbolic token of our appreciation. We hope it will serve to remind him of the great support he has provided the Foundation and the Sensory Awareness community.

Stefan Laeng-Gilliatt studied Sensory Awareness and related practices since 1980 with teachers in Europe and the USA. Drawing at times from his background in Buddhism and Gestalt Therapy, Stefan offers individual sessions, group classes and workshops in the US and Europe. He also works with prison inmates in New Mexico. He was president and executive manager of the Sensory Awareness Foundation from 1995 until 2007.
What Should We Be Tasting Now?

Edward Espe Brown in an interview with Stefan Laeng-Gilliatt

This is an edited excerpt of an interview which was conducted as part of the Charlotte Selver Oral History and Book Project. The project is now in its third year and I have so far interviewed more than 80 people to collect their memories of Charlotte Selver and her husband, Charles Brooks. These interviews are an important source of information for my work on an extensive biography of Charlotte but beyond that they are a wonderful collection of voices in their own right of people who’s lives have been touched by her. Thanks to the support of many and thanks to the generosity of the Sensory Awareness Foundation I am able to collect, share and preserve these memories. You can hear an audio excerpt of this interview and learn more about the project by visiting www.CharlotteSelverBiography.org.

I recently interviewed a number of people from the San Francisco Zen Center community with which Charlotte and Charles had a longstanding friendship. Ed Brown first met Charlotte and Charles at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center in the 1960s, where he was the head cook at that time. Charlotte and Charles were frequent guests at Tassajara where they conducted workshops every summer for many years.

Ed Brown: What Charlotte Selver was teaching is so unusual and it’s difficult for people to get. I remember one of the classes at Tassajara. She was instructing people: “Now turn your head to the right, and then turn it back.” And right away somebody asked: “How are we supposed to do that?” Many years later when I started teaching cooking classes I would say: “Let’s taste this”, and then people would ask: “What should we be tasting?” It’s so hard to get people to just taste. Somehow, many people would rather have the right experience than the experience they’re having.

I now teach something I call mindfulness touch. Part of the inspiration for that is having done classes with Charlotte Selver and Charles Brooks at Tassajara. In mindfulness touch it’s the same thing – mindfulness is the Buddhist concept for experiencing something without judging good/bad, without assessing right/wrong. Just to experience something. This is very challenging, but I’ve come to understand that as long as you’re judging, then you’re not experiencing. Touch mostly comes with directives, and I think most moments of consciousness come with directives, and when you’re giving out directives about what to do or how to be, then how do you experience anything?

I had some experience with Charlotte and Charles finding this out. But it took years to have that really come to fruition in my life. And then it’s so hard to shift. I had terrible childhood trauma. I don’t know what other people experience but the more I started just experiencing what’s inside instead of trying to make sure I was experiencing the right thing I went right into that.

I used to go to Charlotte’s and Charles’ classes on the back porch of the dining room in Tassajara. I would be so tired in the afternoon. I was working so hard and sleeping so little. But when I would go to one of their classes I’d be refreshed after an hour of just having awareness rather than “I need to this, I have to that.”

There’s a story that Charlotte told me about how she started doing Sensory Awareness. I use it a lot when I do Qi Gong with people. The kind of Qi Gong I do is not about getting it right, it is about sensing the movement rather than executing the movement. I don’t know if Charlotte used that language, but it’s what I’ve come to: “Don’t execute the movement, sense the movement.”

Stefan: She wouldn’t use those words but that’s what she did.

Ed: Charlotte heard about a teacher named Elsa Gindler and went to see her. She told Elsa: “I’d like to study with you.” And Elsa said: “You know too much, you can’t study with me.” And somehow Charlotte persisted until finally Elsa said okay. Charlotte said for a year she just thought Elsa was teaching the most wonderful things and everything she said was so brilliant and wise but, she said, “she just didn’t seem to really acknowledge me. When she looked at me she didn’t really seem to be appreciating my being there. And then, after about a year one day Elsa turned to me and she said, ‘Oh, thank God, Charlotte, at last, an authentic movement. You’re not posturing.’” Charlotte said it got a lot harder after that.

So that’s another thing I try to teach people, the difference between being authentic and posturing, or the difference between approval-seeking behaviors.
and being present and alive and showing up. Sometimes I call it getting real. And I don’t see a lot of people getting real. Zen people are often in that category, but not always. There are some Zen people who seem to be more real than others.

Stefan: In Zen you have this challenge of having a very clear form and you have to be real in it. And very often people confuse that and they try to be that form.

Ed: Yes, people confuse that and they try to be the form. Suzuki Roshi said we do formal practice with informal feeling, but a lot of people do formal practice with formal feeling. On the other hand I think that it is very difficult for people coming to Sensory Awareness directly, and not having some practice of here’s what you do and this is how you do it.

Stefan: That is an interesting point. I have worked with people in Switzerland who were peers of Charlotte and students of Gindler and Jacoby, and I know that in Berlin there is a precision that Charlotte had left behind. Not that she was not precise, but she, in a way, I guess she went right for the heart of it.

Ed: I do think that over the years Charlotte must have noticed that a lot of people at Zen Center are pretty “fixed” and doing something the way that they should be doing it as opposed to experiencing something about what’s going on. I’ve been trying to teach that for years, and I’m about as successful probably as Charlotte was, but who knows.

I now have a lot of tasting in my classes. Sometimes I take strawberries, and we taste the strawberries and then I add a little bit of maple syrup: “Oh, that’s nice.” And then we put on a few drops of balsamic vinegar – but not so much that you taste vinegar, but that little bit of tartness and they say: “Boy, this tastes more like strawberry now.” And then a few delicate grinds of black pepper and then they say, “It’s not like it’s peppery or like it’s hot in your mouth, but it’s even more like strawberries.” It seems like you can get strawberries to taste even more like strawberries if you’re careful and you don’t over season.

Stefan: Charlotte used the analogy of tasting a lot, asking us to taste a movement even.

Ed: Yes, well, I have had the experience over the years that some movements or things are much more delicious than others.

I’m working on a new book now about my life. I’m starting out with the time at Tassajara when after nineteen years of Zen practice one day I was thinking well what do I do today while I’m sitting, and the thought came to me, why don’t I just touch what’s inside, with some warmth and kindness. And right away the tears started pouring down my face, and a little voice said, “It’s about time.” So that’s how long it took me – nineteen years of Zen practice – to get around to just experiencing something more analogous to Sensory Awareness. I had a lot of work to do with all of that. I don’t know if that’s true for everybody but certainly for people who had childhood abuse and alcoholic parents it seems like there’s a lot of residual drama which would make it very difficult to practice Sensory Awareness. To open to a kind of internal reality or just sensing what is you have to break a lot of rules. There are rules about that that you’ve made for yourself and if you break the rules you can’t help believing that you’re going to get hurt.

Stefan: It’s interesting that one would then choose a practice like Zen that has so many rules.

Ed: Well, it’s what’s safe – up to a point. I saw Katagiri Roshi after that. He was the interim abbot then, and I said, “Katagiri Roshi, in meditation I’m just touching what’s inside. Is that okay? Is that Zen?” And he said, “Ed, for twenty years I tried to do the zazen of Dogen before I realized there’s no such thing.” There is no getting it right, there is no way you need to be.

I do understand something about being in touch with things and actually sensing things and knowing for yourself what’s what and not having a fixed body that you need to keep. But there is something about the form of Zen that sometimes there’s almost nothing you can do besides study some difficulty. There does seem to be some usefulness in that there’s enough structure. I needed structure. Emotions are mostly from our early childhood. Emotions aren’t about today. Feelings from before get triggered. I’ve gotten lost in that for years and I spent years finding my way out of all that and so it’s hard to know what is useful or appropriate to be doing with oneself. I think that Zen in theory – formal practice with informal feeling, outwardly you are manifesting your life, inwardly you can unravel – can be very useful but I don’t think most people get that. Most people think the thing to do with your life is to keep it together but ideally you keep it together and fall apart.
Otherwise you’re just keeping it together and then all this stuff that you haven’t dealt with is going to get you sick.

Suzuki Roshi used to say hindrances become the opportunity for practice. Difficulties are the way. But I think most people understand no, I'll just do this Sensory Awareness and breeze on through. And in the meantime the people who are sitting still in the zendo say: “Well, I’m accomplishing this practice.”

Stefan: We do want to keep it together. This is really interesting for me because I’ve wondered about why we do what we do – and is it really useful?

Ed: It’s really hard to know.

Stefan: Even in Sensory Awareness I have noticed that we can trick ourselves into sensing something that is not actually there.

Ed: I spent years just trying to see if I could breathe. In Buddhism over and over people say follow the breath and I’ve studied what is allowing the breath. You can think you’re allowing the breath and it turns out you’re just having it go the way you tell it to go. And then every so often you notice something about your breath like, “oh, I guess I was creating that after all.” It’s very hard to have experience that’s really actually fresh and new, immediate. But that seems to be extremely powerful, extremely important for waking up in some way rather than just “can I get better at creating the experience I should be having.”

Stefan: I’m also seeing that whatever we do will always be new experience but from some previous condition. What is fresh experience? In Buddhism you talk of original nature. I have abandoned that notion. What is that even?

Ed: It’s a word. It’s a concept. Original nature is no nature, no fixed nature. Knowing your original nature is knowing that originally you’re free. That there’s not something to do, or fix or change. Is there some point where I could just receive and be blessed by experience rather than finding the next thing that’s wrong with it that needs to be addressed and fixed? That to me is something like Sensory Awareness.

On the other hand, sometimes you want to know, well, how do I cook this? What do I do? We live in various worlds that way, and I think people think when they start to meditate that it’s going to help them figure out what to do and how to do things better and how things will work out better, but I’m not sure – maybe, maybe not. I think it’s more finally about ...

With this our conversation ended suddenly when the phone rang and Ed went to answer it. When editing the transcript for this article I contacted Ed and asked him what he might have said there. His response: “Perfect timing! I think it is finally more about answering the phone when it rings.” He did offer another ending too, though, namely that it is not about things working out better but to be more intimate with our experience, to live from the heart rather than to function in survival mode.

Edward Espe Brown began Zen practice and cooking in 1965 and was ordained as a priest by Shunryu Suzuki Roshi in 1971. His teaching style is both light-hearted and penetrating, incorporating poetry and story-telling. Having been head resident teacher at each of the San Francisco Zen Centers: Tassajara, Green Gulch, and City Center, he has also led meditation retreats and cooking classes throughout the United States, as well as Austria, Germany, Spain, and England. Author of several cookbooks including The Tassajara Bread Book and Tomato Blessings and Radish Teachings, and editor of Not Always So, a book of lectures by Shunryu Suzuki Roshi (June, 2002), he has also done extensive Vipassana practice and on-and-off yoga since 1980. In recent years he has begun leading workshops on Liberation Through Handwriting and Mindfulness Touch, and taken up the practice of chi gung. His critically-acclaimed movie How to Cook Your Life premiered in October, 2007. The Complete Tassajara Cookbook, a collection of his writings, was published in September, 2009.

To learn more about Charlotte’s life and hear and read excerpts from interviews, go to www.CharlotteSelverBiography.org. There, you can also find out how you can support the Charlotte Selver Oral History and Book Project.
Charlotte Selver
Class Excerpts from Waking Up

“What we have to offer you is nothing but that you begin to give up what is hindering you, and you become a little more normal. That you strain less to see, for example. And if you cease to make this effort, then you will no longer feel as if you see with your eyes, but that everything simply comes in and influences you. What is most to be understood is that when I am sensing, my head is entirely free of any intention to sense. I am simply functioning.” p.63

“In any moment in which we are living we can be there for what is going on and have our energy mobilized for what we are doing. That would be healthy living. In the moment when we are not any more clinging to the past, but are letting ourselves be free for what is happening now, we function. There is no room any more for holding back or being lukewarm or all these different manifestations of a protection against something which may not at all exist now. And in case we actually need to protect ourselves now we can do so openly. We can protect ourselves in freedom instead of carrying all this constriction which pretends to protect us.” p.67

“Sensing is getting more in touch with oneself, with others, and with the world. We are offering to you a work which, in its very character, somehow embraces our possibility of getting in touch with whatever we do or whomever we meet — and going as deeply as possible into this coming-in-contact-with-what—we-do.” p.77

Please note: We occasionally share our mailing list with Leaders Guild members who offer Sensory Awareness workshops, but with no other organizations or individuals. Please let us know if you do not want us to share your address at all.

SAF Publications

1) A TASTE OF SENSORY AWARENESS, by Charlotte Selver. An overview of the work, with an edited transcript of a session from the 1987 NY Open Center workshop. 38 pages.

5) ELSA GINDLER, Vol. 1. Memorial to the originator of the work we know as Sensory Awareness. Excerpts from Gindler’s letters, an article by her, and reports from her students; including Ch. Selver, 44 pages, with photos (1978). *

6) ELSA GINDLER, Vol. 2. Memories from Gindler students and an article about Heinrich Jacoby, innovative educator and colleague of Gindler. 44 pages, with photos. *

8) ELMKRIEDE HENGSTENBERG. This issue embraces her own studies with Gindler and Jacoby, her work with children, and biographical notes. She was closely involved with Emmi Pikler’s discoveries. 46 pages, with photos.

9) HEINRICH JACOBY. The Work and influence of Gindler’s longtime collaborator, summaries of his books, interviews with his students, including his editor and colleague Sophie Ludwig. 46 pages with photos.

10) EMMI PIKLER. Dr. Emmi Pikler, Hungarian pediatrician, whose revolutionary practice and philosophy about earliest childhood upbringing has been very influential in Europe. Contains extensive selections from Dr. Pikler’s first book, Peaceful Babies - Contented Mothers, and a paper by Judith Falk, M.D., then director of the Emmi Pikler Methodological Institute for Residential Nurseries. 48 pages, with many photos of young children.

11) CHARLOTTE SELVER, Vol. 1. Sensory Awareness And Our Attitude Toward Life. Collected lectures and texts. Containing: Sensory Awareness And Our Attitude Toward Life; Sensory Awareness & Total Functioning; Report on Work in Sensory Awareness & Total Functioning; To See Without Eyes...; On Breathing; On Being in Touch With Oneself.