Breath and Heartbeat

by Charlotte Selver

This article is based on an excerpt from the newly published audio tape of Charlotte Selver’s August 13, 2001 class on Monhegan Island, Maine.

Just as our heart beats, breathing can happen without effort, without being directed. The air exchange happens all by itself. When the exhalation wants to become deeper, let it become deeper. Don’t direct it. Even the slightest attempt to breathe is unnecessary. It happens by itself.

Do you feel your heart beat right now? You may want to use one of your hands to feel it. You don’t have to tell your heart “beat.” It beats by itself. Wonderful! My heart beats! Enjoy it! Here it is, a sign of life. You have no duty, it beats anyhow.

You can even feel how it’s easiest for your heart to beat just by being peaceful, feeling the natural movements of your own heart which you don’t create. How do you have to sit, for example? Where is it easiest for

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Breath and Heartbeat (continued)

your heart to beat? Some people slump and that's not easiest. Some people straighten up, and that's not easiest. Where is it easiest for you? Just you. This one person in the world which is you.

In the same way, you could be permissive to breathing. As I look out the window right now I can see a tiny breeze outside. Perhaps one or the other of you can see the fine way in which the breeze moves the curtain. The muscles inside are like that curtain, if you permit it. Like the curtain is moved by the wind, so we are moved inside by our breathing, without doing anything for it. If you gently give up doing it, you will experience that it comes all by itself. We should not be the educators of breathing. Breathing should teach us how it wants to be – without our admonishing it.

There is this wonderful nervous system which we all have, from our foot soles up to the top of our head. Everywhere it feels. You can feel whether here or there your breathing is going on, without your doing. Or, as Elsa Gindler would say: "Don't hinder it." When you don't do it and don't hinder it you will feel what happens. Something is going on. From moment to moment, whether you are asleep or awake, there it is. So you don't have to worry about breathing. Who enjoys the idea? No worry! Breath and heartbeat. There they are, and you feel there is something happening – beating in me and living and doing something in me. And I don't do it.

I would suggest when you wake up in the morning that you don't jump out of bed right away. Lie there for a little while as you move from sleeping to being awake and feel how breathing goes. You can learn a lot from it. And you can feel also when you are doing breathing. Many people have learned to do breathing. It's terrible. It's as though we spit creation in the face. Breathing goes all by itself, no matter what we are doing.

I remember one time in class with Elsa Gindler we worked very quietly, and I fell asleep. I woke up and I thought, "Oh, I fell asleep." And my next thought was, "Nobody could see it." I had my eyes closed. But when I opened my eyes there stood Elsa Gindler right next to me and she asked, "Was it good?" That was a great moment. I will never forget that.

Without us knowing, breathing goes on and on. Thank God! You can hinder, but you have to permit at least a little bit of it. When you do too much, you become unnatural; when you do too little, you become stingy. You can feel for yourself what you need, and just allow it. You trust your own feeling. You might feel that you have always denied breathing, that you have always hindered it. Many children, when they are afraid of their parents, don't dare to breathe, really. They don't know it, but they hinder breathing.

You can feel the slightest bit of unnaturalness when you do breathing, even just a tiny bit. I warn everybody who wants to work on breathing to give up these ideas of how breathing happens – just be very quiet and feel what happens by itself. Feel where inside you can feel it, when you are not ambitious, where every little bit of this fine movement, which keeps us alive, can be felt. You can't be sensitive enough for this. We often don't feel spontaneous breathing because it is very gentle and comes without any ambition.

And so it goes on from moment to moment to moment, as you see, for more than a hundred years. There is nothing that has to be done. You only have to feel whether air is going through you. Do I let it? Do I close the doors or do I let my inner doors stay passable, open? Even the slightest inner movement of air exchange can be felt. And nobody has a duty. Be sure not to watch, just be peacefully open for what happens.

Has anybody been at the birth of a child? Everybody is waiting. The baby comes out of the mother and then somebody shouts, "It breathes!" And it didn't know at all what breathing was, you know. It just happened anyway.

What I hope you will learn is giving up exercises and becoming more natural. Whatever you do, don't make an exercise out of it but allow it in its own juiciness. Your heart is beating, your breathing is going without you doing it, thank God. Be there for it – in your natural self, not as an exercise. With this constant exercising, one degrades oneself, one degrades one's possibility. But being there for something is something other than exercising something. Feel how your heart is beating right now and your breath is going right now, when you are not trying to influence it, when you allow it to have its own way of reacting.

As far as I am concerned every moment is a new moment, and I don't exercise it, no matter how long something takes. One can feel when something comes by itself, naturally, and when it is induced, when one does do something to make it be such and such. Allow things to become more spontaneous. Being new, be there for it. This is sensory awareness work. It's supposed to prepare us for life, not for exercises.

Charlotte's Residence on Monhegan Island

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Call (415) 383-2570 or email: kikidemont@aol.com
Dear Friends of the Sensory Awareness Foundation,

The Sensory Awareness community lost two of its most important members this year. We mourn the deaths of Charlotte Read and Betty Keane. Both studied with Charlotte Selver over many decades and brought her work to life in their own very special ways. This newsletter is a tribute to them. Breath and Heartbeat have ceased to pulsate in them but their influences on our work will live on.

As you can read in Mary Alice Roche’s account, Charlotte Read asked us to celebrate life instead of mourn her death. Indeed, we can rejoice in new life in our community as babies were born this last summer to three Sensory Awareness leaders. Leah was born on July 16 to Norbert Boehmer with his partner Yori Levin. Her mothers are Michal Goralski and Ellie Cohen. John and Anne Vitell’s son John Edward Jr. was born on September 5th. And third, my wife, Sarah, gave birth to Julian Marc on September 15th.

Experiencing this new life unfold is like nothing I have ever known before. A new reverence for life is awakened in me and I cannot but think of the many babies who are born in circumstances much less fortunate than ours. Questions arise: What is our responsibility as practitioners of Sensory Awareness in a time and culture that still accepts violence as a means to solve political and social problems? When what some call ‘weapons of mass distraction’ – our mass media – numb us with endless visual presentations of violence, can Sensory Awareness bring us back to our senses? Or, as Betty Keane fears in her interview with Louise Boedeker, do we have the tendency to use the sensory work as an escape? Charlotte Selver once said to me in a conversation about being a ‘leader’ of Sensory Awareness, "You have a powerful tool in your hands. Use it wisely."

Whether we are leaders or not, the question arises about what we do with the tools we are given. In the class on ‘Breath and Heartbeat’ that is the latest of our audio tape publications, Charlotte makes a brief reference to the time when she studied with Elsa Gindler during the 30’s: how dangerous and frightening it was to just drive to Gindler's studio, never knowing whether she would be picked up by the Nazis. Once in class, the work with Gindler addressed what had been stirred up in subtle but very profound ways so that her students went home after class strengthened and with new courage.

How do we use the tools given to us? Western science is discovering now what has been known in other cultures for a long time: whatever we do affects not just ourselves as individuals but our environment as well, even if we are seemingly on our own. This knowledge places a responsibility upon us which is both beautiful and awesome. As we ‘inter-are’ with the whole world we are called to take good care of ourselves and know what consequences our actions have – as individuals, communities, and as nations. In Sensory Awareness, we learn about the innate healing tendencies of the organism – "if we don't hinder it," as Charlotte often quotes Gindler. We learn to take responsibility for our own well-being instead of blaming our environment. Could we explore such tendencies in the larger ‘organisms' we call communities and nations? Maybe we would discover that it is not warfare that heals conflicts but the ability to listen. Maybe we would discover the healing tendencies within communities and between nations. Could we, as communities, as nations, examine how our own behavior causes ‘disease' and violence, instead of looking for evil outside? Could we discover what would have to change in us, how our attitude, our behavior, would have to change to allow healing within and in the larger context of the world? That would be a truly daring Sensory Awareness experiment and it would have to be undertaken with great courage and humility as well.

I would like to close this letter giving thanks to the many people who have contributed to its manifestation. The newsletters are always a collaboration of many people. Louise Boedeker and Mary Alice Roche have made major contributions this time as they have done many times before. But other people contribute to the newsletters in ways not so obvious. Sarah, my wife, for example, always helps me with the editing. Among the other people contributing to this issue are John Vitell and Pamela Strong. A big thank you goes to Pat Meyer of the Sensory Awareness Leaders Guild (SALG) for letting me use much of the material she would have otherwise published in the SALG newsletter.

I wish for us all a peaceful holiday season. May we have the wisdom and courage to listen and respond to the needs within and all around.

Stefan Laeng-Gilliatt
Charlotte Schuchardt Read (continued)

City to give a workshop, so she was also able to be present to celebrate the life of her student, friend and colleague, Charlotte Read.

We had the first hour to talk with each other, while enjoying a light lunch. Then, Jeffrey Mordkowitz, President of the Institute of General Semantics and host for the gathering, introduced speakers and musicians, read letters of remembrance from those who could not be present, and spoke of his own long association with Charlotte. One of her nieces, a cousin, and her many friends spoke of what she had meant in their lives. I'm sorry I cannot repeat for you all the wonderful, funny, moving stories they told – of what she had said or done that they would never forget.

Robert Pula, past President of the Institute of General Semantics, spoke by offering several of his piano compositions, ones he had composed for or played for Charlotte over the years. He was accompanied on the harmonica and drum by, Milton Dawes, a teacher of General Semantics from Montreal. Then Milton played the drum as Aat Dekker, from the Netherlands, gave a beautiful exhibition of T'ai chi – because Charlotte had so much enjoyed seeing it.

At the end, Milton brought out a bag of musical instruments (tambourines, bells, sticks, etc.) and invited us all to join his drumming in making music and dancing. Charlotte's college degree was in dancing, and it was a continual joy in her life. Her niece had ended her remarks by saying that she would always see Charlotte dancing. And we danced, for Charlotte, for ourselves, for everyone.

Charlotte had requested that the gathering be a celebration of life, and it was – a celebration of her life, and, through her, of life itself.

Remembering Charlotte Read

By Mary Alice Roche

I first met Charlotte Read thirty-four years ago, when she was leading classes in Sensory Awareness. I got to know her better when she became a director, and then the
dedicated president of the Charlotte Selver Foundation (now the Sensory Awareness Foundation.) But our friendship flourished in the meetings of the Monday Night Group of Sensory Awareness Leaders and Experienced Students, to which Charlotte Read came every Monday night for twenty years. Sometimes she was an attentive student of whichever member was leading that night. Sometimes she led – wonderful classes. But what struck me the most was that she seemed to live what she taught.

As I was trying to find the right words to describe her, I came across a paper she wrote in 1966, on the effects of working with Charlotte Selver. I feel that in this paper Charlotte Read described herself. Here is what she says: "Study of this work has been invaluable and fascinating to me – to be able to feel the strength of my own resources at any time I give the needed attention. I can experience deeper breathing, the giving up of unnecessary straining, more flexibility and ease, more vitality, a calmer attitude, clearer, sharper perceiving, more contact with what I am involved in. These effects enable me to deal with daily living and its tasks and relationships in a more direct and more effective way."

Doesn't that sound like Charlotte Read? Obviously, Sensory Awareness just helped her be more who she was: flexible; easy; vital; with a calm attitude and clear, sharp
perception; in contact with whatever she was involved in; and dealing with daily living and its tasks and relationships in a direct and effective way – and able to give the attention needed to feel the strength of her own resources at any time. She was all of those things, but also something she didn't mention in her paper: she was lovable and loving to us.

She came every Monday Night until her having to use a walker made it impossible. She would take a taxi to go home, but she always came down in the bus, and was there waiting at the door when the keeper of the keys arrived. In the last year or so, she would stop for a breath each step up the steep stairs. Once inside the studio she would put a blanket on a chair to protect her old sit-bones and sit down and prepare innerly for class. When an experiment asked for lying down on the floor, and then getting up again, she did it. It was wonderful to see her finding her way, giving her quiet attention to her interaction with breathing, with the floor, and with the pull of gravity.

Charlotte gave this wholly present attention to everyone and everything. She was present for each moment, and her presence was a gift for each of us. We still feel that presence.

Charlotte Read  
*Remembered by Louise Boedeker*

Mary Alice spoke of Charlotte's going to the Monday Night Group by bus, but in earlier times she sometimes took the subway. I remember one time we were at the subway stop at 72nd St. and Broadway. It was one of the windiest days of the year, and a big gust of wind came along. Charlotte was a very slight person and I felt she was just going to be blown away. She went up a little, and came down, and said, "Oh! How exhilarating."

I had often told her that what I most appreciated about her was her resilience, her being able to deal with one thing, and then go onto another. She said: "I think that trying to feel what is needed in a situation is an attitude, one of just asking ourselves, 'How can I help in this particular case?' That brings up a great link between General Semantics and Sensory Awareness, in that we don't identify something that has happened in the past with what is happening now. We're treating each situation as new."

She went on to tell me about a quotation that was her favorite, "because it represents the attitude of always being ready for something new." At a time when Gertrude Stein was considering whether she should give up her old way of seeing things she said of herself; "So then I said I would begin again. I would not know about everything what I knew about everything - what I knew about anything... And so it was necessary to let come what would happen to come." That was the Gertrude Stein quote. Charlotte went on to comment on it: "I love that, 'I would begin again.' Here was this woman who had done so much – had written so much, had so many memories – saying to herself, 'So then I said I would begin again.'

"This involves not going around with preconceived ideas. Because you used to do something one way two years ago – five, ten, fifteen years ago – should you go on doing it the same way now – doing something because that's the way you've done it always. that's the way your mother or your grandmother did it? The question is, 'How can I best function now?' and have this attitude of always being ready to begin again, and let come what happens to come."

We proudly offer you two new tapes from classes with Charlotte Selver:  
**Breath and Heartbeat**, Monhegan Island, August 13, 2001  
**Are You Tuned In?** Monhegan Island, August 6, 2001

For a complete list of our publications see pages 10 and 11.
Betty Winkler Keane
APRIL 19, 1915 – JUNE 4, 2002
by Mary Alice Roche

Betty Winkler (Keane), born in Berwick, Pennsylvania in 1915, was performing in Community Theatre by age five, and began acting on Chicago radio while still in her teens. She starred or was featured in many of the most popular radio series, such as Grand Hotel, The First Nighter, Fibber Magee and Molly, and played opposite such stars as Tyrone Power, Don Ameche, Franchot Tone and Errol Aynn in The Knickerbocker Theater Playhouse. Betty Winkler was said to have the "sweetest, most feminine voice on radio," and was a three-time winner of the Radio-Mirror magazine reader's poll for "Best Actress on the air."

In 1942 she injured her back and had pain for many years. When she moved to New York in 1946, to work for NBC Radio, she was referred to Dr. Clara Thompson of the William Alanson White Institute of Psychiatry - Psychoanalysis and Psychology. She worked with Thompson for some time to find out if there was a psychological reason for her pain. Thompson also referred her to Charlotte Selver, who had brought from Germany a work she named Sensory Awareness. Betty studied with Selver for many years.

Though they were divorced in 1962, she had been married to the late radio and Broadway actor George Keane. When he was blacklisted by the House Un-American Activities Committee, Betty was unable to work in radio. She began teaching Sensory Awareness, but with her own, individual approach, which she called "Sensing," a combination of the physical and the psychological. She was the author of a book (1979) called: Sensing - Letting Yourself Live.

She taught sensing privately, with groups and individuals, and also at the New School for Social Research from 1952 to 1979, when she moved to San Francisco for a brief period. When she returned to New York City she continued to teach for more than twenty-years, almost until her death, from a stroke, on June 4, 2002. She is survived by her son, John Keane, of Miami Florida, and two grandchildren.

Betty Keane - Interviewed by Louise Boedeker
The following is an excerpt from an interview Louise Boedeker made in April 18, 1999

LB: How is the sensory work in your life today? You mentioned earlier that, as you get older, it is invaluable to you.

BK: I work everyday at home. And I’ve become a meditator, which I adore. I couldn’t meditate in the beginning. And this is another reason why I support the sensory work so strongly. I feel that for many people – certain psychological types, I don’t know if they are too disturbed or too frightened or whatever – it’s almost impossible to sit still and meditate. And I found, through the permissive attitudes of sensory work, that when I first started to meditate I could let my head come to one side and then come back up to balance, and then go to the other side. I didn’t attempt to just sit there and suffer for half an hour. I did it my own way. Slowly I got so I wouldn’t move that much. It is amazing what happens if you don’t force the organism.

Yesterday I was interested to hear John Bradshaw say that before you can really work on whatever you dislike, you have to embrace it. My experience with people shows me that, and I found that in working with myself. It is very difficult embracing sitting still when you have to keep moving because you’re too [restless] – or whatever it is – to sit still. But the sensory work has a very permissive quality to it. It also helps you trust the organism.

Then there are certain people who are more fearful than others. And for these people, the quality of the sensory work would be a help. It isn’t a discipline, it isn’t that you do it this way or it's wrong: it’s simply getting in touch. I mean, nothing could be more innocent. You learn to accept yourself, and to accept the changeable nature of the organism. If one isn’t really informed about the work, one can minimize its depth because it is non-threatening.
So, I now work each day. I meditate; I do the sensory work, and I know whether I'm in balance or I'm not in balance. Now, as the organism ages, you find that certain things you thought you were getting away with in your youth come back to plague you as time goes on. So, knowing what I know, and having the ability to feel what's happening in the present, which the sensory work gives me, has helped me maintain posture and a certain alignment that I feel places as little stress as possible on the bones and on the joints.

I also have found that when I'm very tense or agitated, in doing the sensory work the same situation can exist but I have a different view. It's like a kaleidoscope. I simply shift the attention. This is the way I use it mostly in my teaching, too. I work mainly privately now, and often, if a person is very agitated about something, we simply stop and do the sensory work. And then when the person is finished doing the non-verbal work, I ask whether they have any additional feelings about the thing we were discussing. It is really surprising how so many problems are caused by attachment. Someone does something and you get upset, and then you blame them, and then you start talking to yourself about it endlessly, and you can't get off the subject. And the whole organism attaches to it. So we try just to give that up for a minute, break the attachment and go to an entirely different level. (Sometimes you can't, but the longer you've studied the work the better you can.) Then you find that the same situation still exists, but really it isn't so terrible. It's something you can maybe see in a different way, and make a deal with.

To me, one of the most important things about the sensory work is the understanding that we are a constant process and we're changing every minute, so that no matter how dire anything is, the perception will experience it differently from time to time. That is the health and the miracle, if you will – that the same situation can exist and all of a sudden you're responding very differently. So, I have that kind of enthusiasm for the work. I had very grandiose dreams, and I think my greatest disappointment is that I was not able to convince the entire field of psychiatry that they had to include this in their discipline. Because you can't just leave a person with a pressing problem from one week to the next; the person must have some ways of working with himself or herself. But it is very difficult to change the culture. Maybe it will happen after I'm gone – and I'll be pleased.

LB: You were an actress during the House Un-American Activities time. There have been crises in this country, and there is a crisis right now in the Balkans, a chillingly difficult situation. And I know that your social awareness is keen. Do you want to say anything about your own social awareness and activities, and what sensory awareness has to do with it?

BK: ......I certainly knew many, many actors who were victims of the Black List and I saw the damage it did. My husband was the victim of it because he had done a lot of work for the union. It was such a scurrilous time in this country. I do feel discouraged that more of our politicians don't seem to embrace psychotherapy, or some of these methods where they would have immediate experience with the fragility of people, and with the fact that they respond better under certain conditions than under others.

When [I was] working together [with a social worker] our classes were very directly connected to many of the social issues that were going on. There is the tendency of many people to use the sensory work as an escape. But I know that Charlotte and Charles have always felt very strongly about [social issues], and I think they used it as I think everyone should – as something to strengthen them, give them more courage.

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The following is a list of members of the SALG who are currently offering regular classes, seasonal workshops, and private sessions in Sensory Awareness. For more information about leaders and their schedules, please contact the leaders or visit our web site: www.sensoryawareness.org

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**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.

2) **SENSORY AWARENESS, THE RECOVERY OF EXPERIENCING**, by Charles Brooks describes workshops of his wife and colleague, Charlotte Selver. 244 pages, with photos. * (Currently out of print. Please help us with your contribution to reprint this beautiful book)

3) **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, photos (1978). *

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

5) **ELFRIEDE 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. 48 pages, with many photos of young children.
Audio Tapes from Workshops with Charlotte Selver

T1 - T4 NEW YORK BENEFIT 1987. Complete Set
T5 GREEN GULCH FARM STUDY GROUP, 5/13/86.
T6 TR EXPLORING THE STRUCTURE OF THE HEAD.
Leaders Study Group 1990, class 7-3-90 p.m.
T7 TR BECOMING READY - BEING TUNED IN.
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