Presence and Absence
by Seymour Carter

By 1967, the year I first met Charlotte Selver, I had been working as a student trainer and group dynamics leader for at least three years. I was living at Esalen Institute, and I had been exposed to a panoply of psychotherapy systems. I was using the encounter group model, based on Will Schultz's confrontational methods, which was to search for and expose emotional lapses. The kicking and screaming models of Lowen’s Bioenergetics were mixed in this witch’s brew of dynamic group interaction. It was 60s pop psychology at its best and worst. The process, using several techniques, was a dramatic enactment of the client’s emotional issues. Our main focus was on evoking aggression and sexuality in people who did not know how to handle aggression or sexuality.

One day in 1967, I walked into our main meeting room at Esalen, and I saw it had been arranged beautifully - wonderfully scented straw mats with Indian rugs on them, flowers placed in the room and, at the head of the room, a sheep skin rug with some kind of headset apparatus lying upon it. The room was empty and spacious. I thought to myself, “This is the first time at Esalen that am I encountering a display of some aesthetic taste and pleasure.” Esalen was rustic and ragged at that time with very little taste displayed anywhere on the property. This scene in our meeting room made me  

(continued on page 2)
wonder why the headset was there and what this group was about. I thought, “I’m going to come back here and check it out.”

I came back later and found Charlotte Selver directing a class with the headset on her head. She had difficulty hearing. In the room were many people standing with stones on their heads. I was intrigued by this scene, so I slipped in unnoticed, put a stone on my head, and began to follow Charlotte’s exploration. She was working with finding balance with our weight and with the weight of the stone. I was astonished that I could explore my sensory experience in such a delicate and accurate way. It seemed to deepen the texture of the awareness that I’d gotten from the psychotherapy, meditation, and LSD experiences I had been involved in since the early 60s. However, the Sensory Awareness practice was significantly more subtle and differentiated.

What amazed me was that Charlotte’s work seemed to link together many of the realms of my previous explorations, and it also provided me an avenue that my Zen practice had not at that time. The Zen Buddhist literature I was reading implied that my Zen practice was going to evoke a state of presence and consciousness that would be significantly different from the ordinary, but my experience was that it had not. The practice seemed to mostly consist of learning to sit in a painful and rigid posture.

During Sensory Awareness classes, we begin to tune in to our inner life: the pulses, the streaming of warmth, the shifts in balance, the rhythms of our breathing, etc. This inner search for the natural reactivity of our organism to its surroundings helps us recover from being out of touch with our organic life. For me, the Sensory Awareness practice of searching for our homeostatic balance was missing in all the other Western therapeutic methods in which I had been trained. None of the other practices had this piece of what happens when an organism comes to rest and balance.

Resting is an important part of presence, an important part of health and healing, of the rhythm of life. Sensory Awareness is dealing with our sensory/motor phenomena. By focusing on these phenomena, we are focusing on what I would say is the autonomic system of self-functioning. Many of our habitual muscular tension patterns are creating problems in our functioning. Sensory Awareness practice teaches us to tune into our organismically driven restorative activities. When we are tuned to the autonomic nervous system, the breathing patterns and the muscular tension patterns that are creating our daily aches and pains can be relieved. We enter into a discreet and distinct state of being.

In Sensory Awareness practices we are not focusing on dreams. We’re not focusing on emotions. We are not focusing on our inner narrative monologue. We are trying to enter into a felt sense of presence. We’re trying to reach beyond our conditioned habits whereby we let the organism’s functions have foreground in our attention field. In standing, by paying close attention to how gravity is affecting our weight and our structure and how we are breathing in response to all of these phenomena, we begin to feel where balance can occur in us and how restoration can be activated.

Doing an experiment in sensing such as with gravity and weight is philosophically going from a universal to a particular. While exploring our weight, the experiments are directed to the experience of our weight in our joints and tissues directly, moment by moment. The teacher takes the universal notion, weight, and unpacks it into the here and now phenomenological experience. And the same strategy works in many domains of human experience. We take an instance like fear and ask the person to describe exactly where and how they experience their fear. This intervention changes the client from being dissociated from their experience to being reflectively engaged in their experience, here and now. Thus, another key to the work is to guide a person into the here and now experience of themselves or, as Charlotte might say, to the “immediacy of it all.”

In my study of psychotherapy, my belief is that Jung and Freud were not the major clinical geniuses of the 20th century. Their foundationalist conceptions of deeper motivational strata in human personalities – i.e.: unconscious drives, the collective unconscious, etc. – are seen to be culturally located constructions, not universals, but artifacts of a particular culture (see: Unauthorized Freud: Doubters Confront a Legend, edited by Frederick Crews, The Jung Cult: Origins of a Charismatic Movement, by Richard Noll). The critical clinical innovators, in my view, were Fritz Perls, Virginia Satir, Charlotte Selver, and Milton Erickson. They provided the strategies for intervening with the present moment’s emergent properties and taught us the power of the now to transform a person’s life.

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I believe, both Gestalt Therapy and Sensory Awareness are forms of meditative trance. My understanding and implementation of this has been mostly helped by Milton Erickson’s work and studies. These practices clearly fit the Ericksonian definition of trance phenomena.

I think students of Sensory Awareness should look into Milton Erickson’s work, particularly his teaching of how to use one’s voice, rhetoric, and observations of clients’ behavior for enhancing the rapport between oneself as a guide and the person exploring their here and now awareness, for exploring their individual search.

Here I will quote from Milton Erickson and Ernest Rossi in “Hypnotic Realities” on two definitions of trance:

(continued on page 4)
SAF Co-President’s Letter

Dear Friends of the Sensory Awareness Foundation,

What is Sensory Awareness? This question is posed to me very often. Yet, the answer to this seemingly very simple question never comes easy. I have always liked the name Charlotte Selver gave this work, although it can be misleading. Charlotte was very aware of the danger of naming what she offered and often worried that Sensory Awareness had become but a brand name or, as she put it, a stamp. The practice of Sensory Awareness is much more than simply being aware. Awareness is only the beginning, a prerequisite for a life lived in harmony with biological conditions and responsive to everyday demands. Life seems to always require new answers, new solutions that can only emerge from the lived moment. And this is what Sensory Awareness is about; it is a practice that re-connects us with the “immediacy of it all”, as Seymour Carter suggests in his article.

The two feature articles in this newsletter embrace this question from different angles and from different time periods. The beauty of our work at the Sensory Awareness Foundation is that we can share diverse writings like these with you, from people who have been deeply touched by the practice Charlotte called Sensory Awareness. But our work is only possible with your help.

This year, we have a number of projects that are crucial for the future of Sensory Awareness. They need the full support of everyone who has been touched by this work. Here is what requires our attention now:


Film Project: We are currently working on a film that will show Charlotte Selver sharing her wisdom in workshops. We are hoping to show the film publicly for the first time at the upcoming conference listed below. It will then be available on DVD.

In A Heart Beat - Sensory Awareness Conference
Experiential Conference at Mount Madonna Center near Watsonville, California, October 13 - 15, 2006. The conference will give a larger audience the opportunity to rediscover the relevance of Sensory Awareness.

The conference will be preceded by a two-day meeting of Sensory Awareness leaders (practitioners): Honoring the Past – Creating the Future. It will be a rare opportunity for leaders from all over the world to meet and explore how to bring this work forward today.

Oral History Project: I am working on collecting an oral history of Charlotte Selver. While Charlotte was alive I spent many hours with her to record her life story. Now, I need to interview Charlotte’s long-time students, friends and family. As many of them are old it is very important to do this now. This is a long-time project and final publication is planned for a future date but we hope to offer some glimpses at the conference.

Monhegan Square House: Charlotte’s former summer home needs a completely new septic system by the end of this year.

All levels of support are appreciated. A regular membership is only $50 per year. Donations in excess of the regular membership help us tremendously in our work to secure the financial future of the Sensory Awareness Foundation. If one of these projects is particularly close to your heart, consider a special donation. We will gladly provide you with more information about your chosen project.

Sincerely,

Stefan Laeng-Gilliatt

“I attended a workshop of Judith Weaver in Japan. It was wonderful literally. I have been trying to be awake since. I wish all people in the world could have the opportunity to wake up.

I hope SAF develops.”

Dr. Yoji Sawaguchi, Japan

SAF Newsletter

Editing & Design: Stefan Laeng-Gilliatt
Send your comments to: S. Laeng-Gilliatt, 2300 W Alameda St. A3, Santa Fe, NM 87507; email: stelaeng@comcast.net The deadline for the next newsletter is October 31, 2006. © 2006 Sensory Awareness Foundation 955 Vernal Ave., Mill Valley, CA 94941 www.sensoryawareness.org
“Definition One: Trance viewed as inner-directed states: Trance phenomena may be understood in the broadest sense as inner-directed states wherein the multiple foci of attention so characteristic of our usual, everyday consciousness are restricted to relatively few inner realities. Because of this restricted focus, new learning can proceed more sensitively and intensely in trance when the patient is not interrupted by irrelevant stimuli and the limitations of his usual frames of reference.”

“Definition Two: Trance viewed as a highly-motivated state: Erickson carefully notes and utilizes a person’s personal psychodynamics and motivation for initiating and developing trance experience. It is a patient’s motivation that will bind them to their task of inner focus. It is this uniquely personal motivation that may account for some of the differences found between laboratory hypnosis, where standardized methods are used, and clinical hypnosis where the patient’s individuality is of essence in the approaches used for trance induction and utilization. Trance is thus an active process of unconscious learning somewhat akin to the process of latent learning or learning without awareness described in experimental psychology.”

The Sensory Awareness class leader is also in a trance state, in the sense that they are focusing on one aspect of their inner experience. While they’re leading the class, for example in standing, they are entering into a kind of trance, meaning, a disciplined inner focus. They focus on the minute details of their inner functioning and balancing in order to awaken the homeostatic processes in their organism. As they are doing that they are transmitting their discoveries to the class participants by articulating their search in the form of questions: “Can you feel what you are standing on? Are you able to respond to the floor? Do you feel anything in your legs and feet responding to the support under you?”

Charlotte’s work has taught me the importance of semantics and rhetoric, saying the right words in the right order, and the language of open options. For example, she would set up an experiment of touching your face, and then she would ask a question: “What do you experience?” That’s an open-ended question and rhetorically it allows the student to find out for themselves. She doesn’t say what’s going to happen. Now that rhetorical ploy is expanded and repeated in the ways of phrasing our indications and questions. When I teach students to lead experiments in Sensory Awareness, their major handicap is that they frame their indications in stark dualism, i.e. “Pay attention to your body and not your thinking.”

In our classes we cannot say, “Do A and not B.” We can say, “Do you sense any distinction between A and B?” I try to frame my indications in open ended phrases, such as “Are you alert at this moment, or are you feeling somewhat depleted? You may find a mixture of those in you, alertness and depletion.” I try to move people away from their “either/or” categories in terms of what they permit as an acceptable response. This comes from Korzybski’s General Semantics: “either/or” thinking is switched to “both/and” thinking to resolve dualism in our logic, opening the possibility that someone can feel a pain and not try to run away from it, to feel anguish and feel that it is part of themselves, not something separate from themselves.

Charlotte’s work also helped me become more accurate in my work as a Gestalt therapist. I began to be able to track micromovements of the people, e.g., their breathing patterns. The sensing methodology seemed to be a practice based on what we now call our body or our sensory/motor expressions. When I work with clients, I pay attention to a suite of activities such as their word choice, their breathing patterns, where they are gazing, and the flash of emotion in their eyes. I also observe the color of their features, how the blood flows in to their face, their vitality and the way they enter and leave the present moment.

Here is an example of how I bring the sensing work into a therapy session. Someone comes to me and they’re curled up in the chair telling me their story. I ask them to begin to explore themselves by sitting up more, letting them expand and take up more space in the world. Well, right away that’s a central existential conflict, because their posture is expressing their shrinking away from the world. They become anxious because they’ve developed no identity about sitting up and entering the world. When they sit up, their breathing is beginning to be difficult. They don’t have the breathing patterns that go with that confrontation; they begin to control their breath and not let themselves breathe freely. They are trying to manage the flooding of anxiety about being so exposed. Very gently, step by step
in micro-increments, I begin to encourage them to let in their emotions and to cope with their feelings, often feeling states which they have not let into awareness.

One more example would be to examine how the person looks at the world. I have found that following a person’s gaze as they look at their surroundings also indicates what they’re contacting in their surroundings and what they’re avoiding. For example, often depressives walk around with a gaze that is fixed on the floor about six feet in front of them. What I ask them to do is to lift up their head and look around. They are afraid to look out, or they don’t have the coping skills to look at the world. And these are central existential questions about meeting the world in order to cope with it. The examples I have just given are both examples of Sensory Awareness tactics applied to both the inner world of one’s subjectivity and the connection to the outer world of people and things.

I had a severe heart attack in March of 2005. During the process I knew I was dying and was accepting dying quite gracefully and gratefully. I have lived a very full life and don’t have any major unfinished business. I have accomplished my life goals and the only thing left for me that I thought would be a good goal would be to have a good death. That of course means quick and sudden, and no lengthy lingering in a retirement home. So when I was having the heart attack I was accepting my dying as, “Okay, this fits. Dying is fitting now. Let’s go.”…… I do not want to live to 102, like Charlotte Selver.

I was rescued by a medical miracle – a catheter and stent treatment that is used for heart attacks currently – and three days later I was mostly okay. I’ve had worse acid trips. Yet I found that for the next six weeks or so, I was very resentful that I was rescued from what I thought to be a good death. So instead of fighting that resentment, I accepted it: I resented being alive. I was going against the grain of common sense that says that I should be happy to be alive. As I move out of the feeling of resentment and start enjoying life again, I can look back and realize I didn’t split myself. I let myself be. In some sense that comes from Charlotte’s work, meditation, and the hundreds of hours of psychotherapy I’ve done. In all of those experiences, the central theme is to accept who I am in the moment and to not introduce the dichotomy of expecting to be someone else other than who I am.

Lest this all sound too deterministic, I’d like to close with a quote from the Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy: “Self: The elusive ‘I’ which has an alarming tendency to disappear when we try to introspect it.” Now that I am an old man, I can say that my lifetime has been about exploring what it means to have a personal identity, and the curious nature of its presences and absences.
December 14, 1949

. . . Gindler explained that, because the faculties of the body have for years been used unskillfully, we have to go about the regeneration process slowly. She said that this is related to the question of natural endowment: We claim that scoliosis prevents us from lying – and later a participant added heart defects to the list of incurable conditions. In both cases Gindler once mentioned: Do you realize how everyone holds on to their “conditions”? We defend them as though they were our possessions. That was important to me. Isn’t it strange that we can hardly conceive of the possibility of outgrowing our “conditions”, that we don’t remember our own abilities to challenge them?
a willingness to experience (Erfahrberücksicht). [...] With this
clarity in my head I can suddenly think, or I can at least get a
glimpse of how thinking starts and works. This clod of speech-
lessness, which has been physically painful, is slowly dissolv-
ing – it is still there but there’s also something new – as I
generally feel renewed.

I experience as very positive that I am not as automatic in
my reactions as I used to be. I’m more able to implement
insights into my daily life and thinking. I actually enjoy living
– even though the circumstances are quite difficult.

I also am more present and not always “occupied” and
busy with the past or the future. I have not as many wishes and
dreams, they are not eating me up as much and
when I find myself dreaming and wishing for
something, I can laugh at myself a bit and I don’t
find it as intriguing but somehow useless and more
like a flight from suddenly pressing tasks.

Being less automatic in my responses also
means that I don’t feel like smoking as much. The
urge to eat has also lessened and is now more lim-
ited to a real need for food.

I had a particularly strong experience of pres-
ence when I went to a concert. Never before had I
heard and experienced music like this before. I
arrived very tired and I was also depressed again
but after the concert I felt renewed and trans-
formed. This was confirmed by different people.
Everybody who spoke with me, commended me
for how good and lively I look. (...) As a result of
this evening I experienced the next day at work
very differently. We had our internal political train-
ing. This is an event which usually bores me to
death and I usually feel irritated and annoyed all
day. But this time I felt alive, interested, receptive.
I felt like participating and wanting to process and
adapt what I heard. I also observed a lot. I noticed the presen-
ters appearance and delivery, I asked myself questions and
thought about what I heard. Suddenly, I was processing every-
thing instead of merely being a victim of circumstances.

I generally feel pleasantly quiet and still. I am stronger and
I feel more capable and receptive. I am not as fearful, if still
quit insecure. I suddenly am more interested in everything and
most of all notice that I am thinking and there isn’t this terrible
stagnation and pressure. I don’t feel driven and chased but
notice the quiet flow of the day, in which I am almost always
present and awake. Even if the quiet flow is at times disturbed
by eddies I surrender and don’t drown but instead resurface
quite gaily. I have also been noticing changes in my voice,
depending on my condition and the person I talk to. . . .

May 22, 1951

... It is furthermore remarkable that, when I am in the city,
I see all that’s happening around me as social phenomena: peo-
ple walking on the street; stepping into a streetcar; reaching for
the telephone receiver; entering the post office; [...] the work-
ners on the street [...] – I see all of this for the first time as
processes and social phenomena – I see figures, movement and
hear people speak.

Suddenly I recognize the connections, the interdepend-
ence, the necessity of it all and I become suspicious of every-
tHING that is artificial and performed. I get glimpses of what I
would call “realism”, I see it in a new context. It’s not just peo-
ple I see differently now but things – a table, the pavement,
train tracks, screws, hinges, barrels, feathers, shoes, and so
forth without an end. All these products tell a story of their pro-
ducers, of the process and the necessity of creativity – if indeed
it is creativity – and not just wanting to get something done.

February 11, 1957

... Gindler did not disapprove of “exercising”. She said that
there is a place for that too [...] But exercising does not go to
the root of our problems. For that, changes in our behavior
need to happen, so that we do not constantly interfere with our
own functioning; so that we are not killed over and over again,
because we have become strangers to ourselves. . . .

Felicitas Voigt’s selected protocols and reports are available in
German only. The book
“Ich wünschte, ich könnte mich zu Tode oder lebendig
schreiben...”
can be ordered through Petra Möhrke, Mommsenstr. 3,
10629 Berlin, Germany; email: petra.moehrke@web.de.
Registration and Information

To register or for more information visit www.sensoryawareness.org or call Sara Gordon at (415) 383-1961.

Sensory Awareness Foundation
955 Vernal Ave.
Mill Valley, CA 94941
USA

Conference Cost

The Sensory Awareness Foundation has decided on this low fee to encourage your participation and to promote greater public exposure to this wonderful study which has enriched the lives of many people throughout the world.

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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.

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) **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. 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.
RECENT BOOKS

12) EVERY MOMENT IS A MOMENT. A Journal with Words of Charlotte Selver from her 102 years of living and over 75 years of offering the work of Sensory Awareness. (125 pages, with many color and black-and-white pictures.)

13) WAKING UP: THE WORK OF CHARLOTTE SELVER, by William C. Littlewood with Mary Alice Roche. Talks about Sensory Awareness, Reports, Experiments, and Exchanges with Her Students. 140 pages.

* available in German translation.

Audio Tapes from Workshops with Charlotte Selver

T6TR EXPLORING THE STRUCTURE OF THE HEAD.
Leaders Study Group 1990, class 7-3-90 p.m.

T7TR BECOMING READY - BEING TUNED IN.
Leaders Study Group 1990, class 7-19-90

T8TR FINDING MOVEMENT THAT IS TRUE.
Green Gulch Study Group 1993, class 4-1-93.

T9TR LEARNING TO RECEIVE.
Green Gulch Study Group 1993, class 3-31-93

T10TR LEARNING THROUGH SENSING.
Green Gulch, 11-14-77.

T11TR FREEING THE EYES - BEING OPEN FOR SEEING.
Green Gulch Study Group 1993, class 3-31-93

T12TR WAKING UP - BECOMING RESPONS-ABLE.
Green Gulch Study Group 1988, class 5-2-88

T13TR PERMITTING INNER ACTIVITIES.
Monhegan Island, 7-31-80.

T14TR BREATHING AND FULL REACTIVITY.
Monhegan Island, 7-28-92

T15TR EXPLORATIONS ON SITTING.
Green Gulch, 2-27-00

T16TR CHARLOTTE SELVER TALKS ABOUT HER EARLY LIFE AND STUDY.
Green Gulch, 12-5-99.

T17 ALAN WATTS ON THE WORK OF CHARLOTTE SELVER.
Green Gulch 12-4-99

T18TR HIP JOINTS AND LEGS.
Santa Barbara, 4-1-00

T19TR COMING BACK TO EXPERIENCING.
Santa Barbara, 4-2-00

T20TR BREATHING AND THE DIAPHRAGM.
Study Period, Green Gulch, 5-12-00

T21TR GIVING UP DOING.
Barra de Navidad, Mexico, 1-19-01

T22TR BEING FULLY PRESENT.
Monhegan, 8-16-01

T23TR ARE YOU TUNED IN?
Monhegan, 8-6-01

T24TR BREATH AND HEARTBEAT.
Monhegan, 8-13-01

T25TR NATURAL OR PERFORMED?
Monhegan, 8-3-01

Audio Tape in German

G1TR VOM NACKEN ZUM GANZEN MENSCHEN.
St. Ulrich, 10.7.01

TRANSCRIPTS. TR indicates that a transcript for this tape is available for an additional $5.

Check our web site for a complete list of publications.

Each tape is of an actual class in the Sensory Awareness Work, and is intended for people wishing to experiment along with the work as it unfolds during the class.

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8 Elfriede Hengstenberg: $12
9 Heinrich Jacoby: $12
10 Emmi Pikler: $12
11 Charlotte Selver Vol 1: $12
12 Every Moment is a Moment: $22
13 Waking Up: The Work of Charlotte Selver $15.50

Individual Tapes are $14 each; Transcripts are $5 each.
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