

ARC Bodywork: A Return to Consciousness

By Jo-Ann Svensson

“How does this part here,” he asked, hand upon my shoulder, “feel about that?” A strange question I thought, but not so strange as the fact that I could answer it. I was in the midst of an ARC Bodywork session and it seemed only natural that I let my body answer. “Uhhhh ...” I sighed, sinking into the part, “it doesn’t like it.” My answer came as a shock and yet on a deep level, it felt true. My ARC practitioner had just asked my shoulder how it felt about a certain relationship I was in and my shoulder had exposed my deepest feelings – feelings of which I had not been fully aware. “What doesn’t it like about it?” he queried further. The answer was immediate: “it doesn’t like carrying the weight anymore.” No wonder I was experiencing chronic pain in my shoulder. I was involved in a relationship where I was not only being held responsible for all matters – financial and emotional – but where I was in denial about it. That is, most of me was in denial, my shoulder, it appears, was all too aware of what was happening. The session continued as my therapist facilitated dialogue between my shoulder and, well, me. By the end, I had a desire to approach the relationship in question differently – in a way that suited all my parts and a plan to carry it through. Several years later, I too became an ARC practitioner, working with the various interconnected parts of my clients (and the various parts of myself).

ARC is an acronym for A Return to Consciousness and in this name lies both the beauty and the effectiveness of ARC Bodywork. As Pietro Abela, the founder of this modality, states: “We cannot hold the conscious state every moment of every day: life is

made to challenge us. ARC training provides the tools to ‘feel’ imbalance as it occurs and then, learn how to return, regain and hold full an expanded awareness.” Thus we learn to “return to consciousness.” What this means in terms of practicing ARC is that the practitioner is not only aware of the client’s state of balance but, first and foremost, their own. It perfectly embodies the maxim: healer heal thyself. Moreover, it does so with compassion, acknowledging that we are all on a journey of self discovery. We are not healers because we have “arrived”, we are healers because we are aware that we are still on the journey. Healing is about how we relate to, and express and communicate, the essence of who we are. Healing, in other words, is about the relationship we hold with our self and how that internal relationship presents itself to others.

ARC Bodywork is a form of healing that prioritizes relationships. It blends together practitioner mindfulness, energy balancing, and a type of body-based dialogue known as BodySpeak™, as a way of opening up communication pathways within the body. These pathways lie between the different emotional or feeling parts of us. For example, my shoulder, as I described earlier, held a part of me that was tired of the way I was living. However, I also had a part of me that was in denial of how this way of life was hurting me. My ARC practitioner facilitated dialogue by creating space for the two parts to communicate. ARC works with the concept that people manifest physical symptoms, such as aches, pains, disease and behaviors, as a reflection of their emotional organization – ways we learned to cope with stress, conflict and other interpersonal issues. If a person’s way of coping, for example, includes denial, over-functioning or

anger, one could then say that their emotional organization is in need of better communication skills. This is true of any organization whether it be the United Nations, IBM or the Girl Scouts. Without open communication, relationships falter and the whole organization suffers. What is true of the external world is also true of that within. When internal communication breaks down or is based on faulty belief systems, we are more susceptible to aches, pains and diseases and our body suffers. When I stopped listening to the part of me that didn't want to care take my partner anymore, my shoulder, where those feelings had embedded themselves, expressed itself in a way to make me listen.

Abela comes from a long line of respected body-focused psychotherapists from Freud, William Reich, Fritz Perls and Alexander Lowen (see Smith, 1985 and Lowen, 1976). To varying degrees, these therapists all believed in the fundamental relationship between one's personality and physical body, and that with physical release, whether that be through massage, pressure points or breath work, there would be a corresponding emotional release. Abela first started exploring the correlation between the body and intellectual/emotional process as a school teacher in the 1980s. Matching eye movement, and later body rhythms and voice tonality to how students received information helped Abela adapt his verbal language to allow students to more readily and easily understand what he was saying. Later, in his burgeoning practice as an energy worker, Abela found that when he encouraged his clients to talk during session, the presenting physical issues tended to heal faster. Further research found that when he asked his clients questions in a particular form, not only would the physical issues

heal faster but there would be less chance of reoccurrence. This “form” marked the beginnings of BodySpeak™— a creative and interactive response to the client’s subtle body language.

Abela’s research found that subtle body language can be highly reflective of one’s emotional organization. Usually hidden behind our normal way of being, this language, i.e. physical movements; changes in skin color, voice tonality and breath rhythms, can be indicative of how we truly feel about what we are saying, doing or experiencing.

“Anne” is a forty year old emergency room nurse with chronic neck pain. During our bodywork session the subject of stress comes up and I ask her how she is with it.

“Excellent”, she quickly states, “stress is good for you.” Her shoulders have tensed, however, with this declaration and so I gently probe further. “What’s good about stress?” Arms now rigid, jaw clenched ever so slightly, she responds: “everyone agrees that a little bit of stress is good for you.” Lightly touching her neck area I ask: “does this part agree?” Anne’s shoulders immediately drop and she quietly whispers, “no”, later admitting that the stress at work is becoming unbearable. Further use of BodySpeak™ reveals the emotional organization behind those rigid shoulders muscles: one must be tough in life to survive; face adversity head on and don’t ask for help. By bringing this belief system to consciousness, Anne now has choice in her life. Whereas before she barred herself against stress, she now has the opportunity to choose whether she wants to continue in this way of being.

A traditional ARC session involves the client lying on the massage table with the practitioner running energy into the client. This ancient form of healing comes from the age-old practice of laying-on-of-the-hands. Today, the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) groups energy healing under the title Biofield Therapeutics defining biofield as the “massless field (not necessarily electromagnetic) that surrounds and permeates living bodies and affects the body” (NIH, p. 358). Biofield Therapeutics include, among others, Reiki, Healing Touch, Qi Gong and ARC. ARC Practitioners begin their sessions by scanning the client’s bio or energy field. Noticing any anomalies in the field, i.e. temperature, density or color variations, the practitioner adds that information to their awareness of the client’s subtle body language. During the session, the practitioner seeks to balance or create consistency in the energy field by running energy into certain places on the body. Combining BodySpeak™ to energy healing increases the potential for the newly achieved balanced state to stay in place and gives tools to the client enabling them to come back to this state, i.e. returning to consciousness, when moved away from it in daily living.

ARC practitioners are trained to hold themselves in a mindful state. Mindfulness is the practice of being profoundly aware of one’s internal and external environment, holding one’s centre and metaphorically rooting oneself deep in to the earth to create an inner stillness. In this place of stillness, ARC practitioners are more able to energetically assess their client’s condition, keep client and practitioner issues separate but more importantly, create a prioritized space for their own self care.

Self care is about the relationship we hold with ourselves. The more intimately we are aware of who we are the quicker we can move back into a state of balance or consciousness when we are moved out of it by the challenges we face in the day. This in turn creates a stronger foundation for our physical health, vitality and passion for life. Furthermore, the better we take care of ourselves, the better we take care of others. This is a key tenet in ARC philosophy. If we are not present to different aspects or parts of our self, we cannot be present to those within our clients. For example, if the practitioner is not in touch, i.e. does not have a relationship with their angry parts, his or her clients will not feel safe in exploring their own anger. ARC practitioners are committed to creating a safe internal environment where all their parts, whether these be angry, joyful, playful or defensive, are accepted and welcomed into the whole. The emphasis in ARC training, therefore, is to become self aware: what we bring to the table as practitioners is a direct reflection of who we are.

Mindfulness, BodySpeak™, and energy balancing are the main components of ARC Bodywork and as such are easily incorporated into massage, reflexology and shiatsu therapies. Tricia Willey, an ARC Practitioner and Massage Therapist in B.C. states: “ARC teaches people to view themselves in a way that is more connected with their bodies... it enables clients to tune in to their body; manifesting healing in a deeper more quicker way.” Anita McHarg, an ARC Practitioner and Pre-school teacher in Seattle, WA uses ARC techniques outside her practice in her parenting workshops. She finds

her students go deeper, allowing for more meaningful discussions, when she communicates with BodySpeak™ and uses her mindfulness training.

A student can take many paths of training at The ARC Institute. Some bodywork professionals pick and choose the courses they are interested in, such as ones that focus on Codependence or Phobia and Addiction, while others choose to complete the full two-year program in order to become Certified ARC Health Practitioners. If one chooses the latter path, there are regular assignments and mentorship, and a substantial professional support network to back the practitioner upon certification. The only pre-requisite is a two-day gateway course called the Essence of ARC. Most importantly, all classes have a deep focus on personal growth and self care. For this is the heart of ARC, attaining the ability to return to consciousness regardless of what life demands.

Jo-Ann Svensson is a certified ARC Health practitioner based in Vancouver, British Columbia, and the Community Relations Director for The ARC Institute. She has seven years' experience working with mental-health and addiction issues and has researched the efficacy of ARC Energy Bodywork with people in early recovery from substance abuse. The ARC Institute is a school of consciousness teaching physical, emotional and spiritual care for self and others. Pietro Abela, the founder of ARC Bodywork, is currently writing a book called "A Return to Consciousness". For more information about workshops and therapeutic sessions go to www.thearcinstitute.com or email contactus@thearcinstitute.com

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