

Arny Mindell

Dr. Arny Mindell is in private practice in Portland, Oregon. He is known for his development of the "dreambody" and "process work" (process oriented psychology). He is the author of 19 books in 21 languages, including *Dreambody*, *The Shaman's Body*, *Quantum Mind*, and *Quantum Mind and Healing*. Arny has an M.S. from M.I.T., was a Jungian training analyst, and has a Ph.D. in psychology. He is also known in the area of conflict management for his *Sitting in the Fire* and for his integration of psychology and physics, work on dreams, bodywork, relationships, and for interventions in near death situations.

✍ The *Somatic Perspectives on Psychotherapy* series (SomaticPerspectives.com) is about psychotherapy with a focus on embodied experience. Our primary emphasis is on clinical approaches, with an experiential feel for each clinician's perspective. An underlying goal is to explore the convergence between clinical practice and the emerging models of the human mind from the fields of neuroscience, evolutionary psychology and embodied cognition. The series' editor, Serge Prengel, LMHC, is in private practice in New York City and leads experiential workshops on Relational Mindfulness.

The following is a transcript of the original audio. Please note that this conversation was meant to be a spontaneous exchange. For better or worse, the transcript retains the unedited quality of the conversation.

Serge Prengel: Today we're going to be talking about Process Work and for those people who are not that familiar with it, maybe know the name, but not so much about the specifics, would you say a little bit about it?

Arny Mindell: You know, I was originally a student of physics and then I studied Jungian psychology and process work began when I realized that dreams and dreaming were not just happening at night, but were happening during the daytime. Process work began with me suddenly discovering quite simply that you can follow somebody's body; that means you follow the signals that they're sending: their face goes down, or their head goes down, their arms go up, or whatever, and by following these signals—the unconscious signals, not the ones they identify with—the signals that people are not usually very aware of, following those signals follows dreams and the dreaming process.

SP: So Arny, you said we're not just dreaming when we're sleeping, we're dreaming when we're awake: would you say a little bit more about that?

A M: Right. I think it was understandable that people got all excited at first and said, 'we dream at night, let's interpret that because that is such a wonderful thing.' And, 'understand your dreams and interpret them and get a lot out of that for your everyday mind.' However, those dreams appear in our bodies during the daytime in terms of our symptoms, those dreams can appear in body signals that we're not aware of—like I said before, putting your hand up or down—just to make a really simple example: someone who says, "I'm a very happy person," but she puts her head down, or her shoulders go down. You can say, "You may be very happy, but I see there's also something *moving downwards*. Let's see what that's all about." Then she says to me, "A dream? I came to you for dream work, I don't know if I want to go into that." I go, "Well, what did you dream?" And the person says, "I dreamed about exploring a cave." So there's her body going down and her dream about exploring her cave.

S P: That's a beautiful example to show those forms of expression of some deeper reality.

A M: Yeah, who we really are is what we say we are and it's what we're doing that we're not totally conscious of; everybody's always known that. Process work simply made an art and a science out of it.

S P: So the art and the science; could you say a little bit more about this process of exploring the process?

A M: Well, "Follow process"—that's something that the old Taoists said about 3000 years BC at least, in China—"follow nature; it seems to know what to do." So that's the spiritual thing, that nature is ancient, she's older than all of us human beings, and we're only about 200,000 years old, the nature of this planet is about 5 billion, something like that. "Follow nature inside of us." The Taoists said this about 5000 years ago, however, how do you do it in everyday life? Then I began to think and say, "Well, I can see dreams happening in the body: how do I follow other things? Well there's other channels of awareness and so the dreaming process manifests in movement—I just described how the woman bent down—and the dreaming process appears visually in terms of fantasies, but it can also appear in terms of sudden smells: take a big sniff: "Mmm, what's out there cooking?" You can dream like that, all the different sensory grounded channels. And it happens to us in synchronicity and in terms of what I call the world channel; sometimes things catch our attention; we don't want to look at them; "Ooh, look at that star out there," or, "Ooh, that's a funny looking kid jumping around there;" these sudden things are characteristic of little flirt like things that catch our attention, those are also part of our dreams. All of that is process work therapy.

S P: So when you use 'dream' in that sense, it's not in the everyday world that we use 'dream' in everyday language.

A M: Right. It can be so much as I dream something, so I use that language when that person is there, but dreaming means following that same process that's behind that dream in everyday life, all the time.

S P: Right, so that in a way following the Tao.

A M: Following the Tao, I like how you say that. And I'll just say one more statement about process work: that idea is so central, useful, that I began to apply it not just with individuals but relationships and then organizations. We've applied that in large group conflicts between groups of people. Groups also have an everyday mind and they have a dreaming mind they don't identify with. And I also said, well, since psychology is supposed to be about people, let's make it about people so then sometimes people start to die, or they get into a coma, so I began to apply process work also in the very altered states of consciousness. So it has quite a spectrum of applications.

S P: So let's stick, for the moment, to the individual and get a sense of what it is; maybe we can come back to a larger context. For people who don't have much of an idea of what the process work is, let's say you just gave a little sense of it with this woman who you observed this body movement and the dream, let's talk a little bit about what happens in a session, understanding, of course, no two sessions are alike, as an example.

A M: No two sessions are alike at all and following the process can be very unpredictable and because I was Jungian at one time before I became a process worker, a lot of people came to me

because of body problems, originally. So, take a kid, I think in the moment a 4 or 5 year old child was brought to me by his parents, his parents said, “He won’t take his asthma medication! Please, please, doctor, tell him to take his medication!” So I thought, “Ok, what does following the process mean here?” So this little kid came in and I said, “Hey, Sam, why don’t you take your meds? It’s going to make you breathe better!” And this little kid, of all things, spit at me. So I thought this is a new kind of therapy I haven’t yet explored what that’s about—that was one of my first clients—so I said, “Parents, please excuse me, I don’t often spit, but since you’ve trusted me and you’re here, I want to play a little bit with your child.” So I kind of acted like I spit, I went “poof,” whereupon he really spit at me, that little monster. And I went, “poof” right back at him and this little poofing back and forth at one another went on for about 5 minutes or so and he started to get out of breath, and I was totally out of breath, we were both so excited running around the room. And the parents were sitting there, looking at each other—they had heard about the fact that sometimes unusual things happen—so I said to them, “Is it ok that I go on with this little bit? I don’t know where it’s going to go.” And with their ok about all of this, we went on for 5 minutes, the kid was out of breath, he turned around and he said, “I like you.” Of course, you know that’s what a therapist wants to hear, I said, “Yeah, but, how come you’re doing that?” He said, “Well, how should I know? It’s just fun.” He said, “I like letting everything out.” So I said, “Well, isn’t that wonderful.” The mother was very nervous, she said, “Are you alright? Can you breathe?” But actually his asthma had disappeared. Did it go out the window? What happened to it? I don’t know. But I do know that this child was very strong and had a lot of aggressive energy which he had not been able to—this was in Switzerland, mind you, which they’re very sweet and very proper—and it gave him a little bit of fun and breakout and I don’t know what happened to his asthma, I can’t explain it, he didn’t need his medication anymore. His doctor came and saw me afterwards and wanted to know what I had done. I just said I followed the kid’s process.

S P: So it’s interesting, I want to give you a little feedback so that in a way you can use it to describe the process, but what I’m hearing is part of you asking in the beginning, ‘What is the process going to be,’ so that in a way just having that attitude of you want to follow the process, you don’t know what it is, but you’re on the lookout for the process.

A M: Open mind and awareness, that’s right. When someone comes to see you frequently, the solution lies within the description of the problem. While someone is telling you a problem, look: watch what they are doing at the same time; that can be very, very helpful.

S P: And so the other thing I noticed in your description is the openness not just to an intellectual understanding of what happens, but actually to following your gut feeling of what happens.

A M: Well, yes, I was following gut feeling, but I was also following a little bit of my intellect which says this child has a lot of spontaneity and the parents are sitting very quietly and they look like they’re really nice people, but there’s a terrific dichotomy: the child has lots of energy and they’re trying to keep everything nice and tame, which I understand both of them, so it became, in a way, a family process. The individual process became at another session later on with those parents, I said, “Maybe you guys want to play a little bit more and tickle each other, something like that anyway; just follow in what’s happening.”

S P: And then you were not explaining the diagnosis of the situation, saying, ‘I see this, this, and that,’ but you acted on it.

A M: Yeah, I see lots of things, but I never trust my mind until I see what’s happened. Then I can behave intelligently, but to behave intelligently before you’ve seen the process is like talking about a world before you’ve seen it.

S P: So understandably with a kid, people have the context of play therapy, and by extension you could say you did a form of play therapy.

A M: Absolutely, you could definitely say that's within the realm of play therapy.

S P: But let's say a grown-up: would you also have in a way followed your intuition and intellect and acted out in a play? How would you proceed?

A M: It depends on the adult: the adult says, "I really need to understand this more, please explain that to me." And I say, "Well, let's follow your process." They say, "I really want to understand;" then the process is to understand. Then I'll say, "Ok, let me use my brain as best I can, let's think about it together, and we can always try something else afterwards if you'd like."

S P: So in other words, the process is large enough to not just include what people would consider process, it would include also the brain and wanting to understand.

A M: Yes, process for me being, as I understand originally, means 'what's happening.' So somebody is intellectual and that is very important to them and I try to follow that as best I can. But with other people sometimes you just can't do that, like for example, there was a big conference that my wife, Amy, and I worked on in Ireland before the Peace Accord. And it had to do with the body and also bringing your dreaming out in a public situation. So a man from the North of Ireland is yelling at a man from the South of Ireland in the middle of a group of several hundred people who came together to talk about the relationship, 'how do we relate to one another after a long-standing conflict?' And to make the story very, very short, the man from the North said to the man from the South, "I'm a politician and you I don't like. Your people attacked mine in a bar and you killed my family member" and the other guy on the other side said something similar. So I thought, "What next? How do I follow the process?" I looked very carefully at the man from the North, and I said, "I see suddenly, as you're speaking, a very red neck. I don't know why, you otherwise look so bland, but that's very, very red." "Well, of course!" he said, "I have lethally high blood pressure, don't you know? How would you know," he says, "you don't know me." So then the man from the South said, "You have high blood pressure, hah. I just recently had a heart attack. My doctor told me, 'Don't go there, you could die.'" So the man from the North said, "You think you could die?" And the man from the South said, "You mean you could die, too?" And something weird happened when the dreamlike body background comes forward and it happened in that particular setting, that the man from the North slowly walked across the room to the other man and realizing that they both were in danger of dying, he put his arm around his shoulder and they just stood there quietly, the whole group settled down. It got much quieter and that was an amazing setting and the next day they're in Dublin where people voted for peace to stop the fighting. Now, this little group, several hundred people, certainly didn't do it, it just goes to show that following the process, watching what's happening that you don't understand, going deep into it can be useful even in large group conflicts.

S P: Yeah, so just watching and that letting yourself—so something happened as you noticed the red neck and you didn't dismiss it; you just followed that. So was it a case of intuition, or intuition and intellect, what happened?

A M: I don't trust my intuition; I trust what I've now seen so many times. I trust when I see something that seems incongruent with the moment, like a very, very red face or neck on a light-skinned person while looking otherwise upset, but certainly not utterly explosive, seeing the

incongruities and bringing those out in the safest possible way—it can work in very rough situations—the safest possible way has until now led to the best conclusion; just follow what’s happening.

S P: So that in a way to follow what’s happening is pay attention to what doesn’t fit the pattern, what is an incongruity. . .

A M: What doesn’t fit: the person is saying one thing, we human beings say one thing, but as every one of us knows, we’re a totality. And our bodies are doing, sometimes, something a little different.

S P: So is there a relationship, let’s say, between that and the shadow in the Jungian approach?

A M: Well the shadow is usually the repressed side of a person, like a man’s shadow is a male, a woman’s shadow is a woman and, yes, you can squeeze it under there. But I’d like to just say if Jung were alive today and he were listening to our conversation he would say, “Oh, Yawohl!”—that means “yes”—“it’s the dream that counts;” the broader concept than just the shadow.

S P: And what you’re doing is you’re on the lookout for that little thing that’s going to be a discrepancy.

A M: You got it, even with people who are in a coma. A person, for example, I write about him in one of my books, who Amy and I worked with, who was in a coma, who was dying, and this was the last day of his life, people thought he’s in a coma, let’s give him an overdose of pain medication, morphine, and make it easy for him. And we thought, well if that’s what the family wants, but the family said no, they had an intuition, something else could happen, so they called us, we went and we saw this man lying in bed, and all he was doing every now and then, his eyebrow would move up and down. Now, every medical person and my own medical knowledge says that may be just some nervous twitch of some sort, but we took that very seriously. We put very, very, very gently, with the ok of his wife who was sitting with us, one of our fingers on his little eyebrow, it just twitched and: “Oh, the eyebrow is moving!” And nothing happened for a couple of minutes and it moved again! I said, “Well, thank you! Your eyebrow moved again. That’s something to raise your eyebrows about.” Just following those minimal cues—they’re incongruent, he’s supposed to be dying, what have you—after about 10 or 15 minutes he sat up, suddenly he was no longer in a coma, and he said, “I want some beer and I want some toast and I want to tell you . . .” And he told the most incredible, fairy tale like type information but was it very related, there was all sorts of things he hadn’t said to his wife, stuff like that. And then a day or so later he quietly went to sleep and that was it. But there’s an example of how there’s so much dreaming, also much of it wants to be expressed, even at times we think, ‘Oh, no don’t follow the dreaming body.’ People frequently respond, I’m saying “frequent” to be scientific, to be conservative, because you haven’t been trained in this, so I want to say people almost always respond; people love being paid attention to!

S P: And that’s the part that people usually do not get attention to because it’s hidden. So that seems to be a good clue to talk about using the process work in relationships.

A M: Definitely, you can use process work in relationships, if you think about those two men I just mentioned, or, to make that very simple, following one man’s process led him to express his fears of death, the affinity to death, and that was actually what he shared with the other person. When you follow your dreaming process with friendships or teamwork or in large group work, frequently that connects in some deep and mysterious way—I say mysterious because you can’t

know it ahead of time—to what the other person is feeling, too. It's kind of a common ground, so that's one of the great keys to relationships.

S P: So that opens up the possibility of a common ground.

A M: That opens up the common ground itself; “You're afraid of that? I'm afraid of that! Wow, so we have something we share.” And that's what's missing; almost all relationship conflicts are about the fact that people feel that their basic essence isn't being shared with the other person. Anyway follow the process, that's what I say. You think, why does it take so long to get that, but actually it's so simple, that's the problem; you need to also use your awareness to pick up these various signals.

S P: So actually when you've been training people, what kinds of things have you been encountering that either hinder or help people get this understanding of following the process in reality, not in principle, but in practice?

A M: When working in our training schools in various parts of the world, I think everybody gets this in principle, it sounds right and it feels right when applied to you, but actually getting it and using it outside; you can use it you can build on it and usually use it in practice as long as you're not bothered by counter transference or people that are upset with you, so that your mind is free, usually you can use your awareness, but problems come when you're alone or you're in a relationship conflict: can you follow the process then instead of just falling into your normal one-sidedness? Here's where personal development is the point: that you need to work out some of your stuff in any number of a thousand ways so that you can remember your viewpoint, but you can stand at least a little bit enough further away from your own viewpoint so that you can see yourself and the other. That's personal development and that's in a way beyond the cognitive training of all of this.

S P: Because cognitive training; that's going to be something at some point that prevents you from being in the process or noticing the process because of your own limitations.

A M: That's right, so sometimes if you can't get away from your limitations, you must stress those, too. I remember working in Switzerland years ago, when we worked in Zurich and somebody in an extreme state, we'll call psychotic state, was seeing me and started jumping around the room and the man scared me. I was a little shy or afraid, and I thought I want to really explore his jumping, but I can't because I'm nervous. So I said to him, “You've got to take care of me first; I'm all messed up. Please take care of me; I get scared when people jump up and down in a room for some reason today.” And he paid attention to me and then I was relaxed enough and worked with him and it went on. So you can bring your own process in some gentle way that's useful for the others.

S P: So how do you or do you integrate counter transference in process work?

A M: Well the counter transference, meaning the way that the therapist feels when the client is upset or in love or something like that, we've considered that also a relationship process. That depends very much upon the situation; some process work therapists may want to protect themselves and simply analyze the situation—“Well this is about your father or mother”—that can be helpful, but frequently, like my own therapist I thought was very process oriented, my own Jungian therapist used to say, “I'm having these feelings, let's go out, instead of sitting in my office, at a café and have a coffee together.” I want to get away from this technical thing, myself. That was very, very helpful to me. That's how he dealt with the counter transference.

S P: So in other words there is a dose of actually putting it out in the open as you were describing in the example with this jumping person; you put it out in the open instead of having to be locked in figuring it out.

A M: Yes, if you can't get around yourself, then you too can be part of the past; you have to ask—it has to be built in—the other person, “Is it ok if I bring out my own stuff for a minute or two?” You have to be very careful, it depends on the client; I can't make a generality about process, but careful, trying to get around yourself and if you can't, you too can be an important part of the process. That man that was jumping up and down needed to know he was scaring people, it was good for him to know he was powerful; he didn't think he was a powerful person. He was so powerful he scared me. So he felt really good about that.

S P: So as we come to the close of this conversation that is in a way too short, I want to see if you have some closing statement.

A M: Well, a closing statement; I never have an intelligent thing that I can think of, but I want to say to you again that you're taking the time to do this; that's something that everybody should be thanking you for. I appreciate people like you that are doing things for the world; we need more characters like you. I have nothing to say to close this process; process can go on and on. Follow your nature; follow nature the best you can.

S P: So that's nice: to have this point that there can be no closing statement in the sense of a process doesn't close.

A M: We're always developing and it even looks like we're developing right up to the last minute.

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