When I’m asked to talk about experiment, particularly experiment that utilizes both active and receptive energy, I think first of how experiment relates to life itself — to the themes that fill and round out a life time — and the risks we, as individuals, take to move ourselves from a passive thinking about to an active risk-taking stance which enables us to push apart our boundaries.

I’m aware that there are certain types of therapy that in essence never draw upon experiment to foster growth and that — even so — clients sometimes grow. But it seems to me that the neglect experimentation deprives a therapist of a most valuable part of her armamentarium. And it deprives the client of experiencing himself in a new and perhaps frightening way in a low risk situation.

Experiments in a therapeutic situation are not playthings that we normally use at the very beginnings of sessions — although there are certainly exceptions to this. Rather they are tools that emerge out of the activity or passivity of a client over long periods of time and out of our receptivity to their modes of being, their themes if you will, and our own active sharing of our process. I recall vividly a man I worked with who over many sessions smiled solicitously every time he talked about incidents which made him angry. At first I was only receptive to his content and responding on that level, but gradually I became aware of a growing feeling of discomfort at the incongruence between his words and his expression, and further of a sense that he was trying to prevent me from reacting to him as an angry man by wearing the mask of a jolly one.

I finally shared my process with him and wondered aloud — actively — whether he was trying to fool the rest of his world in the same way. At first he denied that he was trying to hide his anger. So I had him imagine his wife in a chair and direct his words to her. He did so — smilingly. We had discovered one of his modes of being in the world, one of his themes. You’ll notice that in this particular instance the experiment came before the client’s development of a theme — which is at odds with the way we sometimes teach theme and how the energy inherent in that theme leads to experiment (a “thematic experiment”).

The latter is clearly true; in the development of a theme one flushes out the need or want and in examining the details that surround that need one also stumbles on the resistance which frequently leads to an impasse, a need for direction and hopefully an experiment. But in the man I discussed just previously, a theme per se was implicit in the incongruity of his behavior, and the experiment evolved without much preamble. It was, indeed, an experiment; I may have had a hypothesis, but I certainly had no conclusion in mind. Rather, I was willing to deal with whatever emerged and so to support his experience even if that involved his anger being directed toward me. Always bear in mind your own resistance when doing experiments. If you have the clear or even amorphous feeling that you will not be able to handle that which you actively evoke — pass. Do something else. Grade your investigation down to something you and cope with comfortably. Find out, for example, what your client feels about your observations. This strategy may take you in the direction of interpersonal interaction — which is good!
I’d really like to divide and talk about experiments in two ways: the experiments that evolve from themes and how we deal with them; and the experiments that derive from a pattern of behavior (as did the one I cited above) — a physical movement, perhaps, or merely a word that grabs you in a particular way — in other words, an awareness experiment.

Experiments that evolve from themes follow a particular structure and usually involve a series of steps. First, it’s important to know that there is a clarity to the theme — both for yourself and for your client. In other words, be sure you’re talking about the same thing, be it responsibility, sexuality, problems with authority or how to live with one’s devils — pride, arrogance, greed. Be sure the theme is your client’s and not your own.

You can determine that you’ve picked up on the client’s theme from the amount of energy your client invests in the interaction — not the amount you do, although that too is important. Once you’re confident that you’re on the right track, it’s time to propose your experiment and to get consent for it. Say you’re working with a young man who has definite problems with authority; every time he has to have a conference with his advisor (or his boss, or his father) his stomach ties itself in knots — or to put it more precisely, he ties his stomach in knots — and his palms start to sweat. What he ostensibly wants is to deal with authority, to not have problems with it, to not knot up his stomach, not to have palms that sweat. Very well, there are numerous directions in which you can move. But whichever one you choose, be very clear about what you would like your client to do. For example, spell out that you’d like him to play two parts: that of himself and that of his advisor. Spell out that he should visualize himself in one chair and his advisor in another. Spell out that you want him to have a dialogue between the two characters and that he should move from one chair to the other as he speaks the lines emanating from the speaker in that particular chair. At this point you’d do well to bring your active self into the work.

It is important to make sure that — even though you think this is a great experiment — your client thinks so as well. If it’s clear that he does, if he consents to do it because it energized him as well as you, then essentially you have a contract and may proceed. A contract, not a confluence.

If, on the other hand, he is not energized, or doesn’t feel enough support, or feels the risk is too great or too small, the contract can be amended and the experiment graded up or down — or dropped entirely. To grade an experiment up you may either increase the risk or decrease the support. To grade it down you decrease the risk or increase the support.

In this particular instance if the client had felt it too risky to play both parts in the dialogue, I could have lowered that risk by offering to play one of the parts, or I could have given him more support by offering to be his alter ego and back him up with lines
that he could use in his dialogue. Another way of lowering that risk is to ask him to play it out in fantasy and see what happens.

As it happened my client was quite willing to try to experiment and got a really exciting dialogue going between himself and his advisor. Interestingly, although he was normally a fairly forthright young man when talking to me, he became excessively meek when “playing’ himself. The advisor, on the contrary, was played as a veritable tyrant who certainly did not advise but practiced brow-beating instead. It was also interesting that as the tyrant became more tyrannical, the client became less and less meek until he was matching him insult for insult, demand for demand, and ultimately stating that he, the client, wanted the position of the advisor for himself! Gone were the sweaty palms, gone the knots in the stomach. High and vital was the energy. And a new direction was clear: turn a rather mild though forthright young man into someone aware of his own power and his potential ability to use it.

I’ll give another example. A man comes into my office with a stomachache. He’s eaten nothing that disagrees with him, he doesn’t believe he’s sick, he feels unenergetic. Actually his energy is directed toward his own pain; he is being receptive to it. And I am receptive to both his content and his process, which mobilizes me to listen to my insides and come up with an experiment. I’m remembering that the diaphragmatic armor which includes the stomach is often expressed in nausea and an attitude of “no-no” to life. But how to approach this without literally undoing the armor? Once more I take initiative; I begin by asking him to imaging himself very small, and to take a trip down into his stomach to discover what he finds there…

This time I had a hypothesis, but I had no specific idea of where we would end up — that had to be discovered through the experiment, which led through pain, to loneliness, to sharing, to the diminution of pain. His pain was something which he had to discover on his own through a fantasy trip. It was exciting, moving, fulfilling for us both. And once again we have a theme.

How many times when you ask a client an important question do you get the response, “I draw a blank”? They draw a blank because their resistance to a need at that moment is greater than the ability to share that need, that want. But have you ever asked them to actually draw the blank? To fill it in, as they might in their mind’s eye — much as they would a cartoon strip? I’m amazed sometimes as to how that cuts through the resistances — focusing on their word, taking them by surprise. And occasionally taking me by surprise.

I remember vividly a time when a young man I was working with “drew a blank.” He was a most attractive young man but withdrawn, cool, always taking the chair in my office furthest from mine. Never asking for anything. On this particular day he was more withdrawn than ever, more silent than ever, and yet the room somehow crackled with energy. I bestirred myself to remark on his silence, his withdrawal and my feeling that something important was going on inside him. I asked him if there was anything he
wanted from me — I being the only other person in the room — and he replied, “I draw a blank”. So I had him draw it, and then I had him fill it in, slowly, with people and things and ambience. And what he came up with was a snowy mountain with a small cabin near the summit, and in the cabin was a brightly burning fire and a brightly colored rug with a deep soft weave and nothing else but him — and me. I don’t know which of us was more surprised. Diagnostic? Indeed. A one dimensional, noncommunicative male had revealed depths of brightness and softness and glowing energy and deep wanting that he had forbidden himself to know. A lifetime theme? Perhaps. But I want to emphasize again that when you undertake an experiment you truly need to be prepared for the unexpected, because an experiment is a means of exploration, the ending of which is unknown. And sometimes the ending involves you — me — us.

I could go on offering you examples — there are so many — but let me add only that experiments come in many forms. Pick ones that feel comfortable for you. Pick from dramatization — psychodrama, acting out, empty chairs; from directed behavior — “Behave in a certain way, different perhaps from your usual one”; from structured fantasy — using the material your client has brought in; from dream-work — a whole special area that is demanding and rewarding; from free fantasy — “Take a trip…”; or from awareness experiments in which you encourage the person to use his senses in a new way to explore his world.

I have tried today to focus on experiment in the light of energy — active and receptive — but I’d like to remind you that there are other focal points to consider regarding experiments. It’s extremely important to pay attention to these considerations:

1) How much tension is there in the system — and where? If there’s not enough, one can’t produce; if there’s too much, there’s the possibility of immobilization.
2) What is the want or impulse involved — in other words, what organizes the energy?
3) Where — or what — are the resistance points, the points where the work has to be active?

And some pieces of advice:

1) play off the client’s own words.
2) the final action of the experiment should be related to the opening impulse — thus completing a unit of work
3) Work slowly; heighten the resistance — if there is no resistance there is no growing edge.

Remember: you and your client are a system. Just as the embers in the fireplace have to be fanned to flame, and a poker must be used to move a log so that it can catch — since one log alone cannot burn — so your energy and that of your client must compliment and build upon one another in order for experiments to burgeon and worlds enlarge.