



REVIEW: THE TRAGER APPROACH

Trager[®] — 2: hooking up: the power of presence in bodywork

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Received 1 June 2003; received in revised form 1 August 2003; accepted 1 August 2003

KEYWORDS

Presence;
Awareness;
Mindfulness;
Hook-up;
Trager

Abstract This paper is the second in a series on the Trager Approach from the perspective of an experienced practitioner. The fact that Milton Trager put such emphasis upon hook-up makes it a worthy, if difficult, subject for exploration in these pages. Hook-up, or presence, is challenging to describe since it is by definition an internal state of awareness. The interested reader who wants to understand Trager's contributions to the fields of manual therapy needs to try to feel the effects of hook-up in his/her own body. For that reason the paper offers some simple exercises to try out on one's own or with colleagues or clients. We do not really know how Trager discovered hook-up and its efficacy in his work. Many forms of therapy require abilities that involve great sensitivity and concentration. In many the practitioner listens to bodily responses in order to support implicit change from within the client. What is probably most unique about Trager[®] is the commitment to maintain and share presence as the goal of the session, rather than a particular technique or outcome. Many spiritual traditions have striven for methods that attempt to help persons feel the effects of moment-to-moment awareness. Trager discovered some very simple body-centered methods to do just that. The author draws upon his experience with various forms of spiritual discipline and some of the leading edges of scientific and philosophical inquiry in order to explore some of the consequences of incorporating this state of awareness in all manual therapies. And underneath this presentation lies a subtle controversy: whether hook-up or presence is an altered state of awareness or whether our ordinary state of awareness is the altered one. © 2003 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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¹There are strong similarities between Milton Trager's approach to manual therapy and Eugene Gendlin's approach to psychotherapy. Gendlin's emphasis on the "felt sense" of the client and attention to the sensations that accompany vague thoughts and feelings are based upon well-researched findings that by paying close attention to those sensations, an implicit or deeper level of understanding will surface in the client (Gendlin, 1982, 1996). Trager also placed great emphasis upon the felt experiences of the client and practitioner. In both cases the practitioner is trained to maintain a continuous focus upon present phenomena rather than an agenda of treatment or diagnosis. Both Trager and Gendlin perceive an implicit wholeness, accessible to client and practitioner through presence, which produces healing changes, referred to as "psychophysical integration or felt shifts" correspondingly.

Hooking-up

One of the major differences between the Trager Approach and other forms of manual therapy is the emphasis Milton Trager put on the maintenance of a certain state of mind in the practitioner.¹ He discovered that this state of mind could markedly influence the results of treatment sessions. He called this state of mind, "hook-up", meaning that the practitioner was linking up with a "life regulating force," that also connected him/her with the client, mentally as well as physically. Trager taught practitioners simple but

profound ways to attain and return to this state of awareness. He had various ways of describing this state of mind as: “deeper than relaxation,” “It’s like Zen”, he would say, “it’s like the feeling of... well... nothingness.” “Recall how you feel when you are looking into the face of a baby, or when you are overwhelmed by a sunset” (Trager and Guadagno, 1987).

Like Abraham Maslow’s description of “peak experiences,” once you feel hook-up consciously, that feeling links you to many such experiences in your past, forming a new and transformative way of perceiving life (Maslow, 1962). The practitioner who is in hook-up feels a sense of unity, timelessness, openness, freshness, and surprise. Readers may recall those sessions with clients when time seemed to stop and everything felt connected, and there was a feeling that the client was participating in the same feeling, and that just the right things were happening. Imagine what it would be like to have a way to bring that kind of connection into every session. Trager loved to share this state of awareness with others, whether through his hands, his words, or his presence. He would do his best to infect students, clients, and patients with this feeling and teach them to recreate the feeling for themselves. “Hook-up” is like the measles... you catch it from someone who has got it” (Juhan, 1993). In the last years of his life, he would say repeatedly “hook-up is the work—it is everything!”

What is hook-up?

What is this state of awareness that Trager described? What does it feel like? How does a practitioner learn to hook-up? What does the client experience when the practitioner is hooked-up? What are the results of a session where the practitioner is hooked-up? What physiological and mental changes occur in the practitioner? Can hook-up be practiced no matter what technique is used? What about sessions in which both client and practitioner are hooked-up?

The following are some of the answers, based on the personal experience and views of the author:

- Hook-up is a state of expanded mental, physical and spiritual awareness. One becomes aware of a connection between inner and outer experiences, between one person and another, and a gnosis or inner knowing connection to universal being. Some would call it a state of communion.
- Hook-up feels deeply pleasurable and peaceful. One perceives dimensions that are usually in the

background of our sensibilities, such as: timelessness, silence, stillness, emptiness, and unity. One feels spacious and loving, light and vibrant, awe-filled and expectant. Body and mind feel tingling or shimmering.

- One can hook-up by monitoring, moment-to-moment, the body’s sensory responses from any phenomena and then apprehending the effects of this process.
- When the practitioner is hooked-up the client feels gently held, respected and guided into a state of deep peacefulness, trust, and non-pressured letting go.
- The results of such a session affirm the client’s own inner resources: a fundamental participative process for self-healing that may continue long after the session is over.
- The practitioner becomes aware of heightened physical sensitivity that includes soft hands, and a mental focus that is continuously listening, assessing, affirming, and adjusting to tissue change, rather than removing symptoms.
- Since hook-up is primarily the apprehension of what is implicit in each moment; there is no reason why this state would not compliment any modality. It is a matter of shifting other agendas like: fixing, mending, comparing, or protocol, into the background. Each session becomes unique and latent with possibility, as does each client.
- When practitioner and client are fully aware and conversant about what is occurring in the present moment, there is an interpersonal and reciprocal sharing of sensitivities; and change and transformation are multiplied.

A healing hypothesis

Trager believed that the mind was the foremost channel for healing. “You have to reach the unconscious mind of the client if you want to produce change that lasts (Trager, 1982).”

He believed that all pathology, all limitation is perpetuated because we unintentionally move the sensory memories of negative incidents into our unconscious mind. For example, we experience a negative incident, let us say we are trying to reach the top of a mountain and have to give up... exhausted, unsuccessful. The feelings of fatigue in our body are associated with the failure to reach our goal. Those feelings and associations are stored away in our unconscious mind because we have to go on with other activities. We may not consciously remember the failure to reach the summit of the

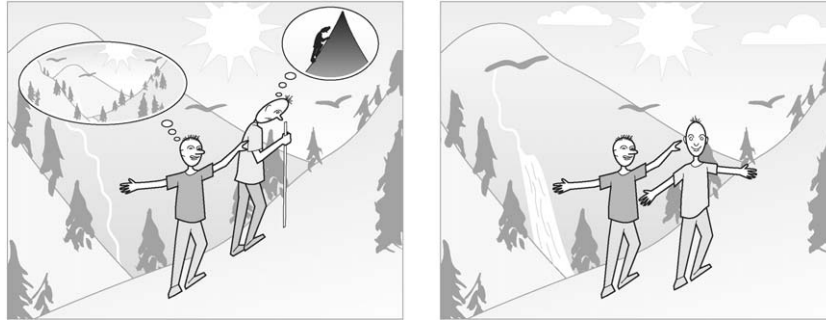


Figure 1 Cartoon of climbing a mountain where the client is looking at the ground, withdrawn into his/her memories of past travails and the practitioner/guide teaches the client/climber to take in the beauty around him e.g. the panorama, the colors, the smells, the plants and animals etc. so that the client/climber can enjoy those parts and not obsess about the physical strain. It does not matter if we attain the goal as long as we can be observant and appreciative. The rewards of the moment far surpass the attainment of the goal.

mountain. But, every time we start to undertake a goal that seems difficult, feelings of frustration and hopelessness and sensations of fatigue, shortness of breath, pain and heaviness in the legs may start to resurface in our bodies.

The practitioner is like the experienced guide who accompanies us up the mountain. He/she can enthusiastically inspire us to complete the ascent and also commiserate with us when anticipation of defeat arises. The practitioner in hook-up is like the guide who has discovered the pleasure that arises from full appreciation of the moment; every step along the trail can be experienced fully, deliciously. The mind of the practitioner communicates this feeling of appreciation of the moment to the client from his/her own felt sense (Fig. 1).

Trager held that long after the body has healed itself, traumatic memories are retained in the unconscious, a vast body-mind filing system of patterned reflexes that limit our ability to respond freely to any situation. Hook-up links the mind and senses of the practitioner to an intrinsic wholeness that he/she shares with the client. This wholeness or, what Trager sometimes called universal mind, guides the practitioner's actions and provides a deeply respectful holding space, and a feeling of joining with the experience of the client. The soft, full-handed contact; the gently supportive rhythmical rocking motions of the Trager Approach reflect an inner state of peacefulness and wholeness that exists a priori in the client.² In other

²Juhan (1993) says that the practitioner has to feel this state to be able to communicate it to the client... the author's inclination is to say that it already exists in the client as a latent state, once the client has a taste of that state the body-mind is reminded of what it already knows.

words, the practitioner is reawakening body memory files that are more appealing than the traumatically linked reactive patterns, and teaching the client how to open them for him/herself (Juhan, 1993). It is as if the body is like an instrument with its own unique characteristics and layerings of tone, timbre, harmonics and rhythms, the practitioner the musician and the melodies are colorful blendings of new and resurfaced material. Trager said,

We hold that the attributes of the body and mind are holistically interrelated in the whole electromagnetic force field that is living matter. Thus mental and emotional patterns are intimately related to movement and expressive patterns in the physical body. Old limiting mental images of the self and one's capacities maintain and reinforce tension patterns and rigidities in the body that result in restriction, pain and loss or impairment of function. These physical manifestations in turn reinforce the self-limiting mental images in a vicious feedback loop. (Trager, 1982)

"We don't replace the memories but we give clients a new feeling, a new memory to choose" (Trager and Guadagno, 1987). Thus healing could be defined as free and easy access to those unconscious files, and the addition of new, positive, freeing information.

Presence, mindfulness, and hook-up

A parallel terminology may help in understanding what hook-up is. In Buddhist and Christian meditative practices there are terms that mirror the state of hook-up. These terms will be used interchangeably throughout the rest of this article. *Mindfulness*

in Buddhism is a state of awareness, which embraces all of reality and non-reality, form and emptiness (Thera, 1979). Continuous *presence* or *nunc stans* in Christianity (Wilber, 1981) is the same sort of awareness—it is a matching or merging of our subjective state with objective reality, including the felt sense of a connective principle or Christ.³ The practice of mindfulness and presence are central to the attainment of Buddha-mind and Christ-consciousness. The mediator in both systems uses various bodily mediated devices to overcome mental and emotional distractions and maintain alert and steadfast concentration on the present moment. In almost all mystical traditions, continuous observation of the present moment provides a doorway to the eternal, the source of all reality.

Trager describes similar openings in himself and his patients.

We are surrounded by a force;
A life-giving, life-regulating force.
It might be electro-chemical; electro-magnetic.
Whatever. We know that this force exists.
We don't have to go a fraction of an inch
Away from our body to get it. (Trager, 1982)

The main difference between the spiritual practices described above, and that of hook-up, is that of intent. The Trager practitioner does not profess a goal of spiritual conversion; only a *sharing* of the experience of presence and sensation. This sharing results in shifts in awareness of the client, the practitioner and their mutual being. Psychophysical integration, Trager's term for these shifts, can thus be described as multi-dimensional.

³“This now, the *nunc stans*, is a no-boundary moment. It has no boundaries because the past as memory and the future as expectations are in, not around it. Because there is no past and no future outside this now-moment, there are no boundaries to this moment—nothing came before it, nothing comes after it (Wilber, 1981)”. This is quite different from what is called *nunc fluens* in which the present is experienced as a fleeting moment sandwiched in between past and future. In *nunc fluens* we experience time as subjective and variable, or objective, or measured (Bentov, 1977). Subjective time is one byproduct of entrancement or hypnogogic states. TS Elliot reveals the consciousness that arises when we bring presence or *nunc stans* into time (Elliot, 1968).

Time past and time future
Allow but little consciousness.
To be conscious is not to be in time
But only in time can the moment in the rose garden,
The moment in the arbor when the rain beat,
The moment in the draughty church at smokefall
Be remembered; involved with past and future
Only through time is time conquered.

Hook-up feels like ...?

What does the state of hook-up or presence or mindfulness feel like to the practitioner? There is a deep sense of peace and assurance and connection with the client and the surrounding environment. The practitioner's hands become soft, warm and spacious. Starting with the hands, the whole body feels like it's filled with a subtle effervescence. Movements produce pleasant shimmering sensations. The mind is clear and perceptive, able to discern very small increments of information. Like a rock climber in a dangerous ascent, all of the sensory channels both mental and physical are open, alert and very receptive but with parasympathetic and liminal responses, and no adrenaline rush. And there is also a strong sense of playfulness, expansiveness and spontaneity. Trager described it as “swimming in a vast ocean of pleasantness” (Trager and Guadagno, 1987). Deanne Juhan describes the feeling of hook-up as “a neuropeptide cocktail (Juhan, 1993)”.

Exercise 1: Inside and outside are the same (allow about 1 h).

Start by palpating or exploring an external object such as a flower or a sculpture or person's body. Notice the kinds of information you obtain through that experience. And notice what your mind does with that information. Continue that exploration until you feel satisfied that you have gathered as much information as you can... Then seat yourself. Get comfortable. Close your eyes. Take some time to recall what you just experienced and notice any visceral sensations still remaining in your body... Pause. Take some deep breaths down into your body. Notice the contact of your body parts that are being supported by other surfaces. Notice the downward pull of gravity in those places and sense the upward push of those supports. Notice how you assess the qualities of those supportive surfaces as experienced through your body. Next, feel the surface of your body; the weight, texture and constriction or looseness of your clothing. Then, feel the surfaces that are open to the surrounding air. Feel the temperature, the relative humidity, the movement of air around your body, and the ambience of the space. Next, go inside and focus into a part of your body that feels uncomfortable, pleasurable or perhaps empty or numb. Carefully map out that area, notice the dimensions and layers of sensations or their lack... their intensity, rhythm, and direction. Notice how different types of sensation seem to arise and fade away. Notice that a part of your mind is able to keep track of any

changes even as another part just monitors what is happening. Pause... Notice how you are now relating to this part of your body. What has changed? Take some time to feel any overall changes that have occurred in your body and mind... Keeping your eyes closed, expand your attention to monitor what is happening outside your body: what do you hear, smell, or feel. Notice that what is occurring around you is mirrored by sensations you can feel inside... Next open your eyes softly and notice what you feel inside as you observe spatial relationships and patterns and rest your eyes on the objects around you... Then start to re-explore the object or person's body you were exploring before. Ask yourself some basic questions: What do I feel inside myself as I explore it? What can I feel from its surface? What kind of internal relationships can I feel in it? How is it affected by my exploration? After you have done this for sufficient time to feel complete, take a little time to sense inside your body and ask yourself "How have I been affected by this experience?"

Present or not?

Since changing the mind of the client was the primary objective of his approach, Trager wanted the practitioner to remain awake and aware and receptive. He was less definitive about the mental state of the client. In the author's opinion, hook-up should not be confused with hypnogogic or trance states in which part of the client's mind is lulled into reduced alertness or torpor. The mindfulness of hook-up should also not be confused with concentration on a particular therapeutic outcome. The practitioner who commits to remaining present and sharing presence is thus establishing the primary agenda of the session: drawing forth and reinforcing changes directly from the client's implicit wholeness.⁴ Every place the practitioner client team focuses, even places loaded with uncomfortable symptoms, can become filled with pleasurable sensations. Like reinforcement in biofeedback, the client can experience a correspondence between his/her own directed attention

and these additional sensations. The client now has a tool to use, the felt sense of hook-up, to relate differently with his/her symptoms even when the practitioner's hands are removed.

The practitioner is monitoring information that only occurs in the present to feel the connection of inner and outer, observer and observed; the "I-Thou" of experiencing. (Buber, 1986). Psychologist Jeremy Horner describes the effects of "resonant causation" when touch is involved as an entry into timelessness. He goes on to say

Touch has great affective flexibility. It can shift from the timeless now to the moving now, and from feeling to emotion, because of its mobility, range of movement and differential pressure. In a second it can move from resonant to mechanical causation, from causal synchronicity to causal efficacy, from I-Thou to I-it (Heron, 1992).

Deanne Juhan (1993) and Jack Liskin (1996), in writing about hook-up, both allude to a hypnogogic or trance state that is induced in the client through rhythmic movement and entrainment with the mind of the practitioner. Relying on Ernest Rossi's (1993) work with Erickson on therapeutic hypnosis, both aver that it is this trance state that allows the client to accept new patterns. Trager himself often talked about "fooling the (resistant or empat-terned) mind." The emphasis upon *client* "presence" in this article is an attempt to correct a contradiction that Trager did not deal with. If the agenda is defined by presence, than any other approach, such as lulling or fooling the client's mind is entrancement and an abandonment of presence.

Weighing—relating to gravity

Trager students learn to practice specific methods for remaining in hook-up. The first method is called "feeling the weight." The student is taught to weigh parts of his/her own body, with and without movement, and to experience the effects of hook-up. Then she/he learns to apply weighing and movement in producing and assessing responses in the client. As a Trager practitioner works with different parts of the client's body, he/she is always asking: "How much does it weigh?" "How does it move?" "How does it (the tissue) respond to my weight and movement?" Passage through the linear rays of gravity triggers neurological responses that contribute towards proprioception. This interactive device is deceptively simple... to apply it continually and with great specificity requires years of practice. What is happening here?

⁴Like most authors who investigate energy work, James Oschman does not talk about presence directly. He suggests that healers can induce a receptive state of awareness he calls "free-runs" that "entrains" and their clients and themselves to the biomagnetic field of the earth and beyond. It should be clear that "free-runs" are comparable with presence (Oschman, 2000).

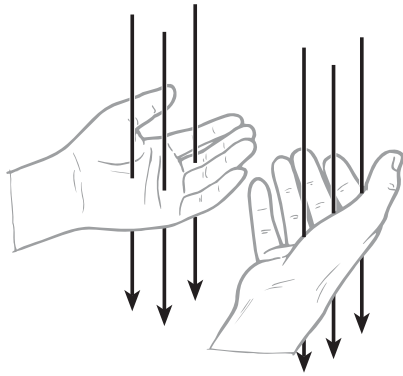


Figure 2 Gravity forces passing through hands, offering a sense of weight.

Measuring gravitational effects is a form of communion with this universal force of attraction and cohesiveness.⁵ The practitioner tracks the client's bodily response to increasing/decreasing weight and movement. Continuous weighing opens the door of presence because weight can only be felt in the moment. Opening the door of the continuous now, gives us access to the gifts of presence mentioned above (Fig. 2).

Exercise 2: Feeling the weight (allow about 1 h).

Sit or stand comfortably and close your eyes. Now, keeping your upper arms comfortably close to your torso, raise your hands and forearms just enough so that you can feel the weight of your hands. Notice that as soon as you think of weight you will start to move your hands and forearms. That is because weight is a relationship between mass and gravity. You must move something through the lines of force of gravity in order to feel the weight. Notice the amount of effort you are experiencing in your upper arms and shoulders. Notice also that as you focus into your palms and move them you feel a sense of warmth, tingling and puffiness in your hands. If you do not at first feel

⁵Gravity offers us a perfect example of a continuum of attraction that is omnipresent and influences all phenomena at all levels of organization. It is a force we have to factor in to every plan, every structure, and every action and yet we do not understand what it is. The greatest philosophers, mathematicians, scientists and anatomists have grappled with the problem of gravity. We are left with ever more sophisticated description of its effects but little or no understanding of its essence. It is interesting that some theoretical physicists are now positing that in order to grasp the real nature of gravity, we have to factor out time and consider the ontology of the universe as a collection of Nows or states of timelessness (Barbour, 2000). Trager felt that conscious interaction with gravity was conscious interaction with universal mind. He devoted much of his attention to exploring this interaction through his own body and those of his patients. His method was inductive, not deductive. His understanding was experiential, not intellectual.

these responses, try resting the weight of your hands and forearms on a comfortable surface like a pillow or massage table and then weigh your hands with the least possible effort. Next, weigh and explore three progressively smaller and lighter *imaginary* objects in your hands: a rock, a coin, and a small feather. Monitor the sensations your body-mind create as you explore these imaginary objects and measure such things as weight, shape, texture, temperature, hardness, heft. Notice that as you explore these objects your hands and mind become more and more linked and that you become more acutely aware of fine sensations and the space around you. Next return your hands to your lap and notice how you feel inside. Bring your awareness into different parts of your body and notice that if you move that part slowly, you also become aware of the subtle sensations of gravity in that body part. Awareness of the subtle sensations directly affects your perception of other sensations. Notice that if you move very slowly it intensifies the subtle sensations from a feeling of effervescence to sparkles. Notice also that you are able to perceive sensation anywhere you put your attention including the space around you. Pause... take time to feel any changes in your body and overall awareness. Remind yourself that the potential for this shift in feeling and awareness exists in all persons at all times and that it is communicable. You can pass this same kind of feeling on to your clients... pause during the session, remove your hands, step back and weigh them, shift into hook-up, and then resume the session.

Taking out the slack, moving from the feet

There are two parts to the weighing and moving that occur in Trager. First, the tissue of the client is engaged and held with soft hands so there is a direct slackless connection between the body of the practitioner and the body part of the client. This is called "taking out the slack". The practitioner feels the tonus as the tissue is engaged, and his/her mind also becomes alert and engaged. The second refinement of this form of mindfulness is for the practitioner to be aware of the sensations in his/her own body. The most efficient way to determine how the movement is affecting the client is for the practitioner to feel and perform the movement from his/her *whole* body. Adding this layer of awareness to the movement brings the practitioner to a sense of dancing the client's body. The practitioner's whole moving body becomes the

instrument for interpreting the client's responses and staying present. Correspondingly, the client should feel the practitioner's body as a dynamic connection to the ground. Trager placed tremendous emphasis upon "footwork." "Bring the movement up from your toes." His background as a boxer and hooper (vaudeville dancer) contributed to this easy way of staying present, "shift your weight, feel the effects in your own body...bring this feeling to your client."

Exercise 3: Incoming from the feet (allow about 20 min).

Have a colleague stand with his/her back to you about 2 ft away, eyes closed. Put your hands on your partner's back. Ask him/her to lean back just enough so that if your hands were not there your partner would fall backwards. Your partner then monitors his/her feeling of trust and the quality of contact from your hands. Now start to bring movement to your partner's body by moving your arms and shoulders. Be sure to keep your legs and torso well planted. Notice the types of information you are able to pick up from your partner's body. Pause... feel any kind of left over visceral responses and have your partner do the same thing. Now repeat the exercise except this time position your body so that you bring all the movements from your feet, so that you can feel the effects of the movement and tissue tonus through your whole body. Have your partner monitor feelings of trust and quality of your hand contact as before. Pause... feel any kind of left-over visceral responses and have your partner do the same thing. Switch places and roles with your partner. Repeat the process. When you finish compare notes with one another.

Measuring effort

Another form of sensory information that can be tracked is effort. "How much or how little effort am I expending to perform this task?" Trager was always asking, "how could this be easier...even easier than that (Trager and Guadagno, 1987)?" The implication is that what is less effortful is also more effective (less is more). The practitioner who asks these kind of questions not only remains present, he/she works more efficiently, with more relaxed hands, and is also bringing the awareness to the client that it is pleasant and easy to let go. The less the practitioner does, the more creative space is opened for the client's experience. There is a parallel once again with the Buddhist practice of

mindfulness. The process of staying mindful involves what is called "bare attention" (Thera, 1979). By practicing in such a way the meditator as well as the bodyworker keeps a channel of surprise and improvisation open. Surely, lightly holding our intentions and remaining present opens us to the muses of manual therapy.

Exercise 4: In doing less—pausing (pausing breaks—allow a few minutes each).

Notice as you are giving a session those times when you feel "stacked up" or limited in your effectiveness because you cannot let go of a certain protocol or goal of therapy. Break physical contact with the client. Step back from the table and ask the client to feel down into the part of his/her body where your hands just were, noticing any residual sensations. Pause... Close your own eyes and feel down into your own visceral sensations. Feel any leftovers from what has just transpired. As you do so ask yourself "What needs to happen next?" Wait until you feel a shift in your own body and feel a sense of where and how to make a reconnection with your client. By so doing you are creating a space for your client to come fully into his/her experience in the moment and opening yourself to the possibility that there could be a whole new level and direction to the session. The more you pause and listen inside, the more you hold your patterns lightly the more effective you can be and the more space you create for your client to heal.

Mentastics®

Between sessions and during breaks within sessions the practitioner practices a series of movements called Mentastics® (compound of mental and gymnastics) on his/her own so that the interaction with gravity can be pleasurable. Trager developed these movements so that he could experience movement with hook-up in his own body. The student learns to use these movements to keep him/herself supple and relaxed so that he/she can impart those feelings to the client. Trager would say, "You cannot give what you have not got." These movements are taught to clients so that they can continue to duplicate the benefits of the tablework between sessions. Watching Trager doing Mentastics, playing with gravity and presence was like watching Fred Astair. "Keep it effortless," he would say, "what could be lighter... lighter still... even lighter than that" (Trager and Guadagno, 1987).

Note: The fourth in this series of papers on Trager[®] will offer an in-depth exploration of Mentastics.

Summing up

Milton Trager opened a doorway in manual therapy that can possibly alter the way we all work. It's his emphasis upon maintaining and sharing this state of awareness as the goal of therapy, and offering simple body-centered devices to achieve hook-up that were crucial contributions to his approach. The practice of hook-up, or presence, in bodywork can offer a wholly different way of perceiving our relationships with our clients. In presence everything is interrelated. There is no separation of phenomenon from phenomenon, distance from distance, or mind from mind. The end of separation is unity consciousness in which all time, all thought, all experiences, and all places, are one interrelated continuum.

In this article we have looked at some of the ways presence is worked with in Trager and have offered some exercises for the interested reader to try. We have attempted to describe hook-up as a feeling, a tool and a connective principle. The various ways that manual therapists have found to map and understand and treat body dysfunction and suffering are complimented by focused awareness. What may be a unique contribution from Trager is a sense that healing is implicit when there is a sharing of

presence (Trager and Mentastics are registered trademarks of the Trager Institute).

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