

October 2007: Leisha Douglas

Leisha Douglas is a psychotherapist trained in several modalities, including *Transactional Analysis*, *Gestalt*, and *Hakomi*. She has taught in the United States and internationally on topics from mindfulness to intuition.

The following is a transcript of the original audio, which is part of the *Somatic Perspectives* series (www.SomaticPerspectives.com). Please note that this conversation was meant to be a spontaneous exchange, not an edited piece. For better or worse, the transcript retains the unedited quality of the conversation.

Serge Prengel: What this interview is about is getting a sense of what it's like to see you work. Maybe if you can think about some of your clients during the past week, and think if there is a session that you could recall that would give us a sense of how you work.

Leisha Douglas: I had a relatively new client, I think it was maybe his second or third session. He's had other therapy, which is common for my clients. I tend to draw people who have been in quite a bit of other counseling or therapies. And he was talking about the difficulties he's having with his girlfriend, with whom he lives, and he was generalizing as to it being that he was suspicious that the problem that he had with her was a problem that he also had with other people in his business and as he was talking about it I was noticing how much energy seemed to be in the upper part of his body. Which is something I do when I'm looking at a client, I'm really tracking all the psychophysical signals including the color in the face, how they're moving, how they're breathing—I think the breathing is particularly significant for me since I also teach yoga and meditation and I'm just very aware of that. And I could tell he wasn't breathing very fully, and there was all this energy in the upper part of the body, and so I invited him to follow that energy and describe it if he had words for it, and he used the word "It feels like it wants to pull

in; it wants to pull my girlfriend in." And then I suggested an experiment in mindfulness, which was a big Hakomi technique...

S P: So I want to just stop you for a minute, to just say that what you're describing is that at first maybe there wouldn't be much of a difference between what you're doing and traditional therapy, talk therapy, that you're talking with a client. But the difference is that you are tracking for signs of energy and psychophysical signs in the client that you're noticing. And based on your noticing them, then you're going to ask something.

L D: Yes, and I'm also working back and forth between the mind-body interface. So we could start with talking, but I'm going to move it into the body if it feels appropriate, or vice versa, depending on my hypothesis about the person in front of me and how safe that person may feel going a little bit deeper.

S P: Okay, so you're not just tracking the psychophysical signs of activation, but you're also paying attention to the safety that exists for the client.

L D: Yes, and so when I was with this client and I proposed an experiment, I was very clear that he could amend it any way he wanted, or he could throw it out the window,

but if he was curious about it, what I invited him to do was; I got a towel out of the closet. And I held one side of the towel and he held the other, and I asked him if he wanted to do it sitting down or standing up. And he picked standing up and I said, “Okay, now lets both get mindful and when you’re ready you really pull the way you want to pull.”

S P: So what I’m hearing is that there’s a lot of inviting in the language and appealing to his curiosity and also involving him in terms of what to choose and what to do, is that part of your approach?

L D: Yes, that’s definitely part of the approach, and always, always tracking each reaction. So when I put something out like that, as an experiment, I’m also watching for his reaction in his face as well as his words, because a very compliant client would just go along with it and not be really involved. So I was trying to see where he was at with it, but he got very interested and in fact put a lot of energy into it and was almost dragging me around the room, and it was very satisfying for him. Actually the next week he came in and reported that that was so meaningful for him because he never had any idea how much energy he put into pulling his partner into his point of view, or his need to do something, and so it’s been sort of a gauge for him that he can use now to modify it, and it’s actually helped their relationship in the last week, that’s what he reported at least. So that kind of sticks in my mind, both because it was kind of funny to me because I was getting dragged around the room, that’s how strong he was, and secondly that it’s something that I just sort of creatively got inspired about, had no idea how it was going to fly, and it turned out to be a really good experiment for him to gain insight into his behavior and his energy and his emotional display with his partner. So that was exciting.

S P: You say it’s a relatively new client that you have seen only a few times before. Did he have the sense as he was starting to work

with you that you were paying attention to body-related things, or did he come for that? How did you introduce this approach to him?

L D: Well in the first session, he had been recommended by a friend who did Hakomi work, and I guess he found my name on the Hakomi website if I’m remembering correctly. And when he came in initially, I always do an intake where I kind of ask people about their previous therapy experience, and then depending on what they say and what they seem curious about I try to clarify a little bit of how I work. And sometimes we even have a small experience of it in the first session, although I always try to make it a small experience because I like to err on the side of going slowly to build safety and also build a container of the relationship, so that people feel more secure when they go into the unknown because this present experience-oriented therapy has a lot of mining the unknown in it for people. And people get scared doing that, they also get curious. So I find I have to monitor them for that.

S P: You mentioned when you were describing this a couple of times, the word “mindfulness.” Do you want to talk more about that?

L D: Yes, that is one of the principles of Hakomi. There are five principles. I think mindfulness for me is very sacred also because it’s very connected to Buddhism, and that’s been an important part of my life for a long time. But in Hakomi we use it as both a principle and a technique. So, as a principle, it’s that we’re recognizing the value of present experience and not trying to impose structure or judgment or old history on this present experience—not that present experience wouldn’t have a tie to our history as a client—but to stay with what’s here right now and try to open to it and follow where it takes us. So we teach the client about mindfulness and how to use it to become more sensitive to their internal experience. Ron Kurtz talks about it as

being able to turn down the noise around you enough so that you can really go inside. That way, we evoke an experience, like I was talking about with my client, we invite the client to go into mindfulness first, and then we go and do the experiment, and it has a much greater possibility of going deeper, I believe.

S P: And that's what you're describing, as a result of the experience, he got literally what it's like to drag somebody to his point of view, or to pull.

L D: Right. And I think we could also talk about it in the form of Hakomi as assisted meditation, because we're kind of assisting the client to be mindful. And the thing that I found really valuable when I was training in Hakomi was how much emphasis there was on helping the therapist become mindful. So that you're mindful as a therapist of how this client is affecting you. So you kind of jump between your mindfulness and theirs, and the co-creation of an experiment and mindfulness.

S P: So how do you track your own mindfulness as you're in a session?

L D: That's a great question. Well, I'm always trying to pay attention to my breathing. Probably because I wasn't a very good breather in my younger years, so that's my first anchor place to go to—am I breathing into my abdomen, my diaphragm, and how's that going? So I go there first, and then I notice what else is happening—the emotions that might be coming up, getting a sense of myself in the room, because when I was a younger therapist, and I've seen this with students also, there's this tendency to get just pulled into the client's experience, I think. Where you are so absorbed, you forget to breathe! So I'm always watching that tendency to come out of myself towards the other maybe more than I need to. And then also, being able to really be empathic to the point of allowing myself when it is a really sad, tragic revelation that's going on, to let my eyes fill

up, and notice that. To be touched by the client but hold onto myself also.

S P: Yes, that feels very powerful, to be touched by the client but hold onto yourself at the same time.

L D: I guess that's what so sacred about doing therapy.

S P: So you talk about it in terms of sacred, and you're also very spiritual, you have a Buddhist practice that's very important to you. So do you want to talk a little bit more about the sacred dimension of the work for you?

L D: I think what's sacred about it for me is the two elements of the truthfulness and the incredible intimacy and the trust. Those two things are implicit in doing really deep clinical work. And I feel like when a client invests themselves with all those elements in the process, it's like they're giving you as a therapist the jewel of their soul, to help them polish and bring out shining. Even though I've been working in this business for over 25 years, the moments when I really feel that happening over and over again just really touch me, and I feel so blessed to be a part of a process that allows that, because so much in the outer world doesn't allow that. So much in ordinary consciousness keeps us distracted and estranged from each other and lying and violent, and all that stuff, so that's why it seems really sacred to me.

S P: So there's a spiritual dimension, an emotional dimension for you, the sense of being touched and letting yourself be touched and letting it be visible. And at the same time as there's all of this spiritual and emotional presence, there's also a very concrete sense of being grounded in the reality of the body. So how do you weave that in the session? Are you aware of your own body through the breathing? How do you weave all of these strands together?

L D: Well, for one thing I always take breaks between clients so that I can kind of

ground myself and prepare myself and let go from one session to another and sort of reestablish my whole body and mind. And then when I'm in a session, at the same time that I'm making the client meditate, I'm also checking in with myself constantly, and that would be my mindfulness, observing my thoughts, feelings, emotions, what's getting triggered, whether I'm spacing out, which doesn't happen very often, but that's an indicator to me that there may be something going on that I don't want to pay attention to or that the client's not paying attention to. So I'm always jumping between the client and myself, tracking both and using my own body-mind as sort of a Geiger counter, if you will. Does that answer your question?

SP: Yes. So the word that keeps coming back is tracking—tracking the client, tracking yourself—and not just tracking thoughts but tracking the whole body-mind of the client and yourself.

L D: And then kind of sifting out—and I think this is something that comes with experience and is harder to do when you're a beginner—which elements of the whole field you want to contact in the client and which things you really want to bookmark for follow-up. Because I think it's inevitable to be building hypotheses while you're working with somebody about how they are in their lives and what their lives look like now and where they may be self-limiting.

SP: So you described what happened with this client, do you want to think about another example to give a sense of the range or the types of interventions or how you work with people on mindfulness, and paying attention to the body and using the body for that experience?

L D: Well sure, here, this example is a technique that actually merges my training in Gestalt and my training in Hakomi. And I've done it with several clients. These have been clients who've come in and felt very overwhelmed, and had a lot on their plate.

So what I've asked them to do is designate pillows in the room depending on size and color and weight, as the different elements of this overwhelm. Like one pillow might be picked for the career problems they're having, another might be their relationship with their mate, another might be a specific task they have on their plate, they have their deadline, another might be a child that's problematic. I remember one client ended up using every single pillow in my room, which must have been about seven or eight pillows, and he was surrounded by these pillows, because the other thing I did was ask him to get mindful and put the pillows, once he picked the pillow for the subject, and in proximal distance in terms of how it felt energetically to him in his life. Was it something that was really even on his body? Or was it something to the left or right or center? Well, this client ended up sort of in a moat of pillows. And he was so astounded when he looked around him and he said, "No wonder I feel like I can't breathe." Because he was just covered—I mean he had pillows on him, he had pillows around him. And then as a result of that we were able to get clear about which ones he could actually address, which ones he could maybe put a little further away or were connected to some other pillows, so that took a couple more sessions to work through that, but it actually gave him kind of a visual and kinesthetic sense of his overwhelm, so that he was able to strategically approach and prioritize the things that were overwhelming him and begin to kind of chip away at them. So that would be another example of how I work, integrating various techniques and mindfulness and present experience.

SP: So the present experience brings me to the other point, you're also a poet. Does that side of you also manifest in your work as a therapist?

L D: Occasionally...I think one way it does is my choice of language. So when I'm trying to help a client put words to an experience...sometimes you get clients who are very verbally unable to describe what's

going on with them. And I'll let them search around a little bit, but then if I feel it's appropriate I'll jump in with some words. And I think that's where my verbal ability, my poetic self comes out sometimes, because I often choose a word that's right on for that client, and it's such a relief for them to have a word for it. Sometimes I've actually used some poetry as an intervention, or a way to kind of integrate a client's experience. I remember using, for a woman who was going through a major breakup with her husband, and there was a lot of family strife as a result, I used Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art." There's a line that's repeated in there, "The art of losing isn't hard to master." And that poem became so important to that client that she went out and bought Elizabeth Bishop selected poems and stuff and thanked me for it many sessions later. So I really believe and have experienced the power of the word when it's imbued with mindfulness and creativity.

SP: So mindfulness and creativity are really the key words for you, aren't they?

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L D: Yes, and you probably have experienced this, when people become healthier, one of the things that you see restored is their creativity. So I really am an advocate for that, when I'm doing an intake on somebody, my intakes are kind of loose but one of the things I'm always doing for that is not only what are they doing for their physical health, but where's their creativity? Where's their passion? I just think that's so important for all of us.

SP: So it seems to be fair to say that your passion is about creativity.

L D: Yes, and the arts, I think. I love music, I love poetry, I love the visual arts, and I think regular doses of exposure to those things, even if you're not involved in them as an artist are really good at sort of jumping you out of your ordinary consciousness and maybe filling you with some kind of inspiration or new way of looking or feeling.