

December 2007: Linda Marks

Linda Marks, MSM, is a body-centered psychotherapist, life work counselor, social architect and author. Through her work with individuals, couples, groups, and her personal example, she helps others heal from the soul level up and create new heartfull possibilities for their lives. She is the author of *Healing the War Between the Genders: The Power of the Soul-Centered Relationship* (HeartPower Press, 2004) and *Living with Vision: Reclaiming the Power of the Heart* (Knowledge Systems, Inc., 1989). She has appeared on numeral television and radio shows and founded the *Institute for Emotional-Kinesthetic Psychotherapy* in 1990.

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: Do you want to tell us a little bit about how you came to do what you're doing?

Linda Marks: Certainly. One can say I literally followed my heart. When I was a young girl, I had a very clear sense of mission, I was very much a social visionary kind of kid, and even thought I was very shy, introverted, I was organically thrust into leadership positions from grammar school on. But I also grew up in a very, very toxic family, and in addition to that there was just a real gap between how I saw the world and what I saw happening. And what was very scary is that the social visionary-type people were assassinated when I was very small. I went from one assembly to the next, watching Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, John F. Kennedy—all of them were shot in a very short period of time. So I was afraid if I really came out and did what they did, someone would shoot me. But when I was 16 and I worked at Boston's Baseball Stadium, Fenway Park, I was coming home on public transportation and a stranger came out of the shadows and tried to rape and murder me. And so here I was, I might have been a leader in my community, but I was really just a 16 year old kid and I was far from what I saw I needed to contribute with

my life and I tried to talk my way out which really pissed him off and I physically tried to fight my way out and even though I was 5 foot 6 and a tennis player, a 6 foot 2, raging man is no match for me. I couldn't possibly get away so I ended up having to turn it over to the god I was never raised to believe in. There's a whole thread of four-legged animals running through my life and my work; my brother and I used to joke that "god" was "dog" spelled backwards, which isn't the worst theory. But the long and short of it is I had to turn it over to the God I was never raised to believe in, and a little voice first came through my heart and said if I was going to live I had to really commit to that sense of mission I had inside. So I made that commitment from my heart. And then more words came from my heart that said to forgive the man that was beating my face in and trying to kill me and without using my head, without understanding the meaning of forgiveness, I just spoke right from my heart and I told the man, "I forgive you" and he burst into tears, and he stopped beating me. And metaphorically he was my first therapy client. The first words out of his mouth were, "I don't want to be doing this" and that's where I literally had an experience of the power of the heart and where I began to study the power of the heart.

SP: So really that sense of “in the moment” and speaking from the heart and, “I forgive you.”

L M: And I don't know that it was the “I forgive you” part that was as important as that I went in very deep and I listened to my heart. Because what I've learned over the years is that there's a very primal intelligence in the heart. Many people consider it, at some level, even more central than the brain, and research that's taken place in the more newly established fields of neurocardiology and neurochemistry have helped us understand the heart better. I remember when I was in my twenties, and I'm 48 now, people at cocktail parties whom I told that I worked with the heart would always make fun of me, saying the heart's a mechanical pump, it goes, “pump, pump.” But it isn't that at all, it's like a master gland and it secretes hormones that help regulate the entire body; it's the first organ to form in the body. And it's also a very important organ as it relates to oxytocin and cortisol, which are—oxytocin is the love or the bonding hormone and cortisol is the fear hormone. And in the last couple of years there's been quite a lot of information available about love and fear and cortisol and oxytocin, but the long and short of it is: when we're under what's called long-term stress . . . and the funny thing is that's longer than 15 minutes so anybody who routinely commutes to work will have long-term stress everyday, never mind the people with the bigger stresses of our lives about meaning or relationships or too much to do in the crazy day-to-day world. When we're under that kind of stress, cortisol is secreted, which originates in our days when we didn't live in this world, where we had hunter-gatherer forefathers, and the kinds of stressors they faced were more like starvation, or major injury, or really bad weather. Those were the kinds of things, so the body had to mobilize and break down non-essential organs and tissues to feed vital organs. So when cortisol levels are high, we automatically digest our bones, muscles and

joints so that our vital internal organs stay alive and it induces a lot of the things we see in our culture today. It makes us hungry and we reach for high calorie food, it causes depression and anxiety, it weakens our immune system, it suppresses libido, it could be toxic to brain cells, it's correlated with all of the cardiovascular disease we find—whether it be high blood pressure or heart disease, clogged arteries—it contributes to obesity, diabetes, osteoporosis. So the antidote to cortisol, as it turns out, besides changing our lives so there isn't that much stress, is creating more oxytocin in our bodies, which is known as the bonding hormone because when moms give birth to babies, and I had this experience first-hand when I had my son, the body automatically starts to generate oxytocin because it facilitates emotional bonding and it's in many ways the anti-stress hormone; it counteracts the effects of cortisol. And all of the things that degrade our health can be reversed when we have regular oxytocin in our body. And some of the ways that we generate that are the very kind of body psychotherapy that I practice and teach; meditation, which is a key part of the work; nurturing touch, with permission, is a big piece; having real, meaningful heart to heart listening and emotional support; having a place where the pace is just more quiet and slow and reflective, much like a spiritual place or a place of worship.

SP: Linda, at the risk of simplifying too much, what I'm hearing is that stress in our life, and stress as something which you say long-term stress can be as little as 15 minutes, creates a use of cortisol which depletes our body in lots of different ways. And the corrective to that is to increase the levels of oxytocin, which is a corrective experience that we can recreate through the experience of love-bonding as well as meditation, psychotherapy, and other corrective experiences. So in doing that you obviously change and correct the criticism of, “it's just a pump,” because if these very powerful chemicals that are released in our body, that either deplete us or strengthen us,

have to do with the heart, obviously there's a central role for the heart.

L M: Yes, and there are many other levels where the heart plays a role, too. If I move over more to the field of neurocardiology: I have a colleague named Linda Russik who used to be at the University of Arizona, she still lives in Arizona; she and her dad were at Harvard Medical School doing some of the original work on heart-brain registration. And what's been found is that the electromagnetic field generated by the heart is the strongest in the body; the electrical charge generated by the heart is about 60 times that of the brain, and the magnetic force field generated by the heart is about 5,000 times that of the brain. Where that is important is that the literal power of our heart is actually stronger than the electromagnetic power of the brain and in the research my colleague did, they found that you could see heart-brain registration. So when a person is in a very grounded, solid emotional state, their heart field will impact the mental space of the people around them, and if I apply that to the work that I do, I clearly have to take very good care of myself with a balanced, grounded, reasonably paced life—you know, engaged, but still slow and spacious—so that when any person comes to work with me, I can be an embodiment of a very clear, grounded heart space that can help them and therefore their heart, their body and center at that energetic level because when people are within 8 to 10 feet of each other, their heart waves interact even without words. And when there's touch, because my work includes touch, with permission, to facilitate the emotional work, that's a very direct conduit for that heart energy field to meet another person's energy field as well. So in terms of working with the literal energy field and the electromagnetic force of the heart, that's another tool that can be applied in this kind of work.

SP: OK, so you have both, your medical research and your direct experience that shows that there is an energy that's

transmitted person to person that comes from the heart. And I think in your work you talk a lot about what things were like in a tribal society where people had more of a connection and how this work is a conduit to finding that.

L M: Yes. I love to work one-on-one with people and I love to work with couples because there's the whole depth of couples therapy that happens with this kind of work. However there's something very, very special about doing this work in a group, because just as our electromagnetic fields touch when we're within 8 to 10 feet of each other (between two people), when you have a group sitting together, you create sort of a heart container; and there's a level of depth of the work that can take place and it's really profound. An example that was very, very moving to me, and this probably happened about 10 years ago; there was a woman who was actually—unfortunately, this story had been in the papers in the Boston area—who was divorced and her ex-husband had remarried, and she had gone on her first vacation ever, and during that time, her ex-husband and his wife and her two children were hit by a drunk driver. And in the accident, her ex-husband, his second wife, one of her children were killed, and her other child was severely brain injured. And the grief and devastation of this woman, who herself was in the healing arts, was just beyond belief. The pain was so great that just regular therapy, or even regular body work, wasn't really touching it, and she came to a workshop that I ran, a group setting. And because we actually had the entire group present, and therefore we had a much deeper container, there was a way we really had “the village”—there's the saying, “it takes a village.” It took a village to create the containment for this woman to really delve into the depths of her grief and it took our physical bodies to make some sort of physical contact for her to be able to scream and writhe and be angry and sad at the depth—it really met where she was. And that bad experience was so profound she started to study with me afterwards. I had

another experience—it was similar—I was giving a retreat at one of the teaching centers around here, Kripalu, and there was a participant who had lost a son in a very tragic freak accident in another country—and here his son was in his thirties, he was a prodigy, a master teacher—so he was in this other country because he was an emissary for the kind of work that the man was putting out throughout the world and he had a simple infection and he just died. And you cannot imagine the grief of the man; I had a group of 38 people holding him. And that was the intensity necessary for the man to feel met in the depth of his sobbing and grief.

S P: So here what you're talking about is—you said they're holding him—so there is really the physical connection, the touching, the presence, and the physical closeness are an integral part of your work.

L M: They very much are. These two situations are sort of unique because these are people with catastrophic situations, in which case, at some level they need the physical containment of other people's heart fields so that they can have the safety and the internal space to connect with and even to express the depth of what they're feeling. In more ordinary work, where I'm working one-on-one with somebody or even in a group, where other people can be what I call "helping hands," what we do is we track more, what I call, the emotional-kinesthetic charge, which is the edge of energy in the body—I talk about the emotion-body interface, because where the emotion meets the body is a point of entering into working with the heart's energy field. So, for example, if I had a client who had a lump in their throat, with their permission, I might ask, "Is it ok to put a hand where you feel the lump in your throat?" And they can take my hand, if it is alright, and adjust it to exactly where they feel the lump and they could adjust to exactly the right amount of contact or pressure. And it might be, as I put my hand to where the lump was, they might just burst into tears. And I might say to

them, "your feelings are as important as your words" because often it's the non-verbal space that needs to be present and held as the talking part. And then after they have their tears come for a certain amount of time with me just being present, I might ask, "If the tears had a message what would they say?" And the person might say, "You're not alone." So there's a real depth that comes with that physical presence and if I am really an open, respectful space, they can feel that through my energy and through my body.

S P: So what you're describing is the case, in this example, of a person who feels an emotion as a physical symptom of the lump in the throat. And you ask for permission to touch, but the touching occurs as the person places your hand on that part of their body, feels the contact, and as they feel the contact, then there is the emotion coming up, in this case the tears. And what happened is it brought up that sense of aloneness for the person.

L M: Yes, and a thesis that goes with this that's very, very important, is "emotional safety;" that is the foundation of my work. One of the most interesting things I have found, because I've been in this work for about 25 years, and I have taught all over the world and have taught quite a lot in this country, too, is that as I was leading workshops, I started to realize that when people felt emotionally unsafe, they had all the kinds of symptoms, be they physical, mental, or emotional, that lead them to seek medical care or psychotherapy. Whether its physical things like lumps in throats or knots in stomachs, or tensions in shoulders, hearts pounding; whether it's emotional responses like feeling afraid or hopeless, or scared or alone; whether it's thoughts like wanting to disappear, "when is the other shoe going to drop?," "Is it ever going to be ok?," whatever level. When a person feels unsafe they have those kinds of symptoms. As emotional safety is created, though, those symptoms all start to go away and the person starts to experience a sense of

connection and inner peace. So as I became aware of that correlation, I realized that establishing emotional safety was the most important thing I could do, and for different people it happens different ways. For some people it's about presence, and they'll only really get that I'm present with eye contact; with other people it's silence, and just being able to be present in silence; with some people it's a talking connection; with other people they feel the safety when there's touch, for other people the safety is knowing that there doesn't ever have to be touch. But the most important thing for me is establishing emotional safety with the person I'm going to work with, both from the very beginning and over time and in each and every moment.

SP: So very clearly, you're focusing on that emotional safety in the moment and over time. How do you track the sense of the client feeling emotional safety?

L M: That gets to the emotional-kinesthetic charge which I talked about earlier. At first I thought it was an intuitive capacity I had, but because I've apprenticed other therapists, (I've trained other therapists since 1990), it's something that I've helped them to come to know, too. So what I could go so far as to say is: the human being is an organ of perception and the skin is our largest organ and that when we get really grounded and have a strong sense of our own bodies, our own hearts, our own sensations, our own feelings, we sort of learn that non-verbal language ourselves. We have a space where we can perceive and palpate that in somebody else. So I literally read someone's energy at a physical, emotional level; that's how I tell. For example, if a person is not feeling emotionally safe, I can feel a tightening in their energy. If the person really feels unsafe, I can feel them dissociate. I try not to let them get that far, you know, I try to feel that direction where the energy is shifting, so that I can address what do they need to be safe one way or the other before they ever have to go that far. Because being present and grounded is a key

piece, too, but in essence I can literally feel it. And I can feel it in my hands, I can feel it in my heart, I can feel it in my thought; I can feel it in every possible way, which is probably why my work is called emotional-kinesthetic psychotherapy—the kinesthetic referring to the felt sense.

SP: So in other words, the instrument is how you feel things, the felt sense you have of other people. And that's something that could be described as, resonance or intuition?

L M: Yes, it's a resonance, it's a kinesthetic intuition—in my training manual I talk about kinesthetic intuition because it's different than intellectual intuition. It's a "body knowing." And as I train therapists, one of the things I require of them, is to do quite a lot of this work themselves so that they experience what it's like, because at some level, if they haven't experienced that kind of connection and body knowing themselves, then it's very, very hard to track somebody else.

SP: So then it is something that happens at an intuitive level, but then at the same time you notice that it is trainable, because as you get more experience of it, then you develop the ability to . . .

L M: Yes, and if I have a new apprentice, or even sometimes if I'm trying to teach a client more about their own body awareness or how to hold their own somatic and emotional experience, I'll just have them notice subtle little changes. Like one of the things that I do is, say I've had my hand on someone—it could've been this case, if we go back to the lump in the throat—I had my hand where the lump in the throat is, and the person has had some tears, and when I've asked what the message of my hand was, they said, "You're not alone." Then I'll ask what's happening in the throat, and the throat will often just soften up and relax and the person will feel light and they won't feel sad, they'll feel a very different feeling with energy and with peace and before my hand

comes off—because I ask for permission for hand to go on, I also ask permission before it ever comes off—I’ll go through this little protocol of what you need to be safe and complete for the moment before the hand lets go, and after they try to look at what they really need to be safe in the moment. Because one tool is: if you can be safe in the moment; that is an anchor, that is a moment of really having what you need and in some ways one can say emotional safety is learning and having what we need—experiences for what we need. Once we’ve gotten that far, what I’ll invite them to do is to take a little body Xerox of the way they’re feeling in their body and the way it feels with my hand present with their body. Because they can take that little body Xerox as a kinesthetic imprint and one thing they can literally come back to at a sensory level, at an experiential level, from a memory place and return to it because then they know it is possible. So, one can say: when you create an experience, when a person has a conscious record of an experience, then it is indeed a possibility. If you have not had that kind of experience, the best something can be is an intellectual concept and it’s often very intangible.

SP: So you’re describing a situation where the client has the experience of your hand touching the part that’s activated, the throat in that case, has the experience of not having you touching them, is able to notice the difference between both experiences, and then is able to remember what it’s like to have the moment where they were being touched and feeling more.

L M: One can say—in my work I talk about feeding and nourishment—there’s a degree that that kind of physical contact that’s set up based exactly what the person is feeling, so where the hand is and exactly the quality of touch is tuned to be exactly the way the person needs it and then responding also to the emotional level of what’s going on in addition to whatever the body tension is, the person gets something they need, and in some ways they feel literally nourished or

fed by the experience. So they have the before experience of the tension, and not feeling so good, they have the process experience of how the contact is made, and then the changes that happened along the way which could include tears or release or something else. Then they have the experience of the afterwards when it’s almost as if they’ve just gone through a cycle and something has completed for them, internally, so then they know what it’s like to go through the cycle and to feel that sense of completion or having been fed or nourished, and then they have the touch point of what it’s like for the hand to let go and to still have that sense of feeling fed because many times they feel like I’ve left a magical carbon copy of my hand even when it’s not there. So there are all kinds of level of neural rewiring that take place from that quality of contact.

SP: So that’s very dramatic when you explain it in the case of physical contact, the hand touching. Some of your work involves not touching, so how does it happen when you deal with a client for whom touching is actually a no-no and emotional safety comes from not being touched?

L M: Well, as I said, the heart field is an energetic, palpable phenomenon, even if we’re not making physical contact, so I can still feel and read the signals from the client even when there isn’t touch, so I will be attending to their emotional safety and I will ask them questions like, “What do you need to be safe right now?” if I sense that I need to ask that. Often people just don’t know because no one’s ever attended to emotional safety in that kind of way and whether it’s what I say, or if I talk, or if I just am with them, or if I invite them to go inside. One of the things I do quite a lot is I have people close their eyes and take a few deep breaths and just even notice what’s happening in their own body and their own heart, because most people aren’t very experienced with their own internal landscape. If I say, “What’s happening in your heart right now?” they won’t have a clue of what I

mean until they start to have the experience of sensing and feeling their heart and then the person might say, “My heart feels really heavy.” So I will certainly take them inside so they can have a sense of their bodily experience and their emotional experience. I can support them in feeling grounded, whether it’s feeling the physical connection with the couch they’re sitting on, or their feet on the ground, by all means the key is really respecting them, and both responding to the content of whatever the story is and also to the energetic cues they’re giving me from their body and their heart.

S P: So obviously not just the content of the story but the energetic cues, and I think, maybe, that’s where you learned a lot from one of your masters, Angelo.

L M: Yes. Angelo was one of the first feral cats I helped take off the streets and actually I wrote an article about 10 years ago that was published in Spirit of Change, which is a New England regional magazine, and that became one of their most popular stories. They had just had their 20-year anniversary, I’ve written for them all 20 years, and when they did their “Best of 20 Years” Issue, they republished, “Life on the Emotional Streets: The Feral Human,” and you can actually read the article on their website: spiritofchange.org. But Angelo was a brown tabby and white cat tom who came into my driveway probably around 1990 and he was emaciated, he was incredibly thin, and incredibly weak, and terrified of people. And this is the case with many feral creatures; they are both dying of starvation but so afraid of humans that they’d rather die of starvation than get what they need. So the whole process, talk about emotional safety, of trying very earnestly to create some sort of connection with Angelo, and one where I had to just really let go and have an open hand with a feral cat . . . you never know if they’re ever going to come back again. But what ended up happening over the course of a year is he seemed to come back every single day and we went from him being terrified, even to know I was in the

house, to him being able to be in my driveway and be aware I was thinking about him, to him being able to take food I’d leave at the bottom of the stairs and then go away and he’d eat it when I was in the house, to him letting me watch him eat, to eventually, one day, coming in my front door when I opened it. And he, ultimately, was one of my most important teachers about the depth of what respect is, of what presence is, what having an open hand so that I was truly not attached, and yet holding a space for connection should he wish to make it with me. He was one of my very most poignant teachers about the process of connection and intimacy.

S P: So as you’re describing this, it feels like a very powerful metaphor, powerful image, to keep in mind in terms of what the process is. It’s like taming the feral heart.

L M: Yes, because there is a feral aspect to most of us people; there are not many people who have gotten through this world without some kind of trauma, or deprivation, or neglect, or parts of ourselves that just simply have never been connected with or developed. So, yes, there is very much a feral aspect to people and I’ve found that particular metaphor, the feral human, something that many, many people relate to, and many people find me and come to work with me because they resonate with that metaphor.

S P: Yeah. And you talk about the traumatized heart. So what’s the healing process? It’s not just love.

L M: Well, it’s all how you define love. I think there’s certainly a lot of skill. I could go so far as to say love is a skill—it’s not just a feeling, it’s a skill. And it’s a skill that requires an ability to be very grounded within yourself and very present within yourself and very spacious. But also to have really clear boundaries, too, because the feral animal only feels comfortable and safe when you’re super present and grounded with sort of a magic balance of spaciousness

and yet boundary-ness and having—I actually ended up taking 8 feral cats off the streets and I’ve also worked with wolves and there’s a similar kind of grounded-ness required to work with a wolf as well. So one could say that having the presence and being emotionally willing to bring that kind of attention and respect to another being, that’s what I call sacred respect, and it also includes managing your own emotional and physical psychic energy. So I could say I’m a light bulb and rather than having a 1 and 2 and 3-switch, I might have about 10 different settings from very soft to very intense because that’s what the person, or the animal, in front of me needs in order to feel safe and in order to feel met. So part of loving, to me, is the ability to modulate my presence and my energy so that I meet the being in the space which is where they need to be met. And to me that is a part of loving.

SP: So loving is a skill that you can develop and learn to modulate.

L M: Yes, and I wrote an article called, “Learning to Love Another Person on Their Own Terms” because I think that that’s a huge piece too—every single person who comes to, and this applies to life, it applies to clients, it applies to children, that come into your life, it applies to a partner or a friend or a colleague—everyone is a unique individual. And to create the emotional space, the mental space, the energetic space to truly, truly see someone for who they are and the gem of what is in front of you, the unique story, and to truly respect it and to take the person in for who they are. That’s a huge piece of loving, and to me that really is a skill.

*This is part of USABP’s “Somatic Perspectives” series, edited by Serge Prengel.
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