

## **Cutting Through Chaos**

By Keith Eric Grant, PhD, NCTMB

"There is the Hasidic tale of the great Rabbi who was coming to visit a small town in Russia. It was a very great event for the Jews in the town and each thought long and hard about what questions they would ask the wise man.

When he finally arrived, all were gathered in the largest available room and each was deeply concerned with the questions they had for him. The Rabbi came into the room and felt the great tension in it. For a time, he said nothing and then began to hum softly a Hasidic tune. Presently all there were humming with him. He then began to sing the song and soon all were singing with him. Then he began to dance and soon all present were caught up in the dance with him. After a time all were deeply involved in the dance, all fully committed to it, all just dancing and nothing else. In this way, each one became whole with himself, each healed the splits within himself which kept him from understanding. After the dance went on for a time, the Rabbi gradually slowed it to a stop, looked at the group, and said, 'I trust that I have answered all your questions.'"

- *Lawrence LeShan*<sup>5</sup>

We all benefit at times from retreating to a place in which the input to our nervous system is less chaotic than that of the normal pace of life. In doing so, we provide a space for regrouping our own energy and direction so that we may better meet creative opportunities. As I sit down to write this month's column, I have just returned from such a time; five days at the Esalen Institute, taking a workshop on Thai massage facilitated by Richard Gold.<sup>2</sup> One of the impressions I have taken away with me is that of an interleaving dance of gentle rhythms.

Esalen is located on a sliver of land along the rugged Big Sur coast of California. At the western edge of the institute, the land sweeps precipitously down to the sea. Immediately to the east, the Santa Lucia range rises

steeply. Within this sliver of land bathed by alternating sun and cloud, the ever-present rhythmic surge of waves breaks against the rocky shore. Joining these natural rhythms are the predictable human rhythms of the meal and workshop schedules. To these general rhythms, my own experience added the slow palm presses and stretches of Thai massage. Richard, both conscientious of time and material and possessing an ever-present twinkle of eye, marked the session boundaries with the soft tones of a meditation bowl/bell struck three times and with the chanting of the traditional homage to Father-Doctor Shivago.<sup>2</sup> Day by day, we worked together through the slow, well-organized protocols of touch.

I dwell on these descriptions of rhythmic tempo and organization because I believe that we can learn much about the power of massage to center and heal from looking at situations in which chaos overwhelms and sensory integration fails. It is in these venues that the tools used to cut through chaos become most needed and most obvious.

Carol Kranowitz describes children who become overloaded with sensory information and cannot integrate the world around them to respond appropriately.<sup>4</sup> Many individuals with *pervasive developmental disorders* (PDD) have difficulty attending to tasks and learning new skills because they operate at high levels of arousal and anxiety due to over-reactivity to sensory stimuli.<sup>6</sup> For these individuals, stimuli that for most of us would be barely noticeable evoke sensory defensiveness and flight-or-fight responses. What's interesting from a massage perspective is that rhythmic brushing of their skin with soft surgical brushes and rhythmic joint compression often seems to help children with deficiencies in sensory integration deal better with their surroundings and achieve a state of calm alertness. The patterned stimulus appears at least partly to counteract the sensory chaos.

While those with PDD form the outlying edge of those having difficulty with sensory input, they are not alone in struggling with sensory overload. Elaine Aron estimates that about 15-20 percent of the population is composed of what she terms *highly sensitive persons* (HSPs).<sup>1</sup> Aron describes HSPs as having both greater sensitivity to subtle sensory inputs and a much higher susceptibility to experiencing sensory overload and fatigue from intense or sustained stimulation. While discussing the use of anti-anxiety medications for crisis intervention, Aron recommends more lifestyle-oriented methods for ongoing care:

"There are other ways, however, to change your body chemistry - a walk, some deep breathing, a massage, a healthy snack, being held by someone you love, listening to music, dancing. The list goes on and on."<sup>1</sup>

These lifestyle methods combine to create a space of sanctuary, seeking emotional support, and immersing ourselves in repetitive rhythmic motions. In applying rhythmic movements and pressure, we perhaps intuitively act on the physics observation that nearby systems with similar resonant frequencies will synchronize, a phenomenon that can produce entire trees filled with synchronously pulsing fireflies.<sup>8</sup> We pace so that we may subsequently lead. Behind the slow rhythmic patterns of a dance, such as Ma Avarech<sup>7</sup> or the gentle repetitive patterns of caring touch, there is great power for integrating our bodies and minds and cutting through chaos.

"Life is formed from life, and there are cycles of beginnings, endings, and in-betweens. We can learn to organize this energy to build an identity, form communities, and make alliances to take care of what matters to us. There's also a time to surrender to this vast, resonating field of excitation and let it organize us. This teaches us to trust the territory beyond the self and to dissolve into the intelligence that reaches beyond the dominion of the personal 'I.' This is transcendent membership in the universal community of space, wisdom, and being. This energy simultaneously seeks balance and disruption, homeostasis and growth, becoming and dying. To live in the center of this contradiction is how we continually form, contain, release, and re-form the body we are."

- Richard Strozzi Heckler<sup>3</sup>

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