

# First Steps with a Transformational Learning Group: Inviting the Implicit

[an excerpt from the soon-to-be released book edited by Susan Gantt and Bonnie Badenoch, *The Interpersonal Neurobiology of Group Psychotherapy and Group Process*, Karnac, 2013]

Bonnie Badenoch, PhD, LMFT

As I walked into the main room at the retreat center, about 10 of the 24 people we were expecting were creating nests on the floor – with backpacks, blankets, and pillows. There was a light murmur of voices, as some were talking with one another, while others were more indrawn, awaiting what would come next. I was aware that some of the participants in this interpersonal neurobiology study group knew one another, while others were embarking on this process alone. A small Queen Anne chair stood waiting for me. I felt a moment's hesitation at being “above” the group; then realized that the environment was already supporting ease in a way that would set a tone conveying a felt sense that safety and connection might be possible no matter where I sat. We had each entered through a warm kitchen and were welcomed generously by the woman who had organized this experience. We shed our shoes, and found places for the sand trays and miniatures we had brought. Through the ample windows, we could see mid-summer flowers and the curving green lawns that surrounded our room at this rural retreat.

We were going to meet together for a year to sink deeply into interpersonal neurobiology, coming together every other month for a weekend that would include exploration of concepts, always coupled with experiences to help our embodied brains take on the shape and meaning of what we were learning. These people had made quite a commitment and some had come quite a distance as well.



Why do we humans – both as participants and facilitators - move toward group experiences? What is it about our neurobiology that may call us in this way, and what might our embodied brains gain as a result? As interest in right hemisphere-centric processes has grown in the last two decades, we have found scientific roots for the claims of attachment theorists that from before birth until our last breath we are genetically inclined toward seeking connection with others (Cozolino, 2010). In early life, our interactions with those who mother us (regardless of gender or

relationship) give the initial shape to the neural circuitry that contains the perceptual templates for how we believe relationships work for us (Schore, 2003; Siegel, 1999). These inner guides are as individual as our fingerprints, and whether they move us in the direction of satisfying relationships or propel us toward a series of painfully familiar encounters, the movement toward making connection is inexorable for most of us.

As we move out of the family into more diverse groups – the neighborhood, school, circles of friends, eventually work life – these inner knowings about the potential shapes relationship might take for us form boundaries around what may be possible. These patterns are active in all the people in the therapeutic or educational encounter, including us, even though we therapists and teachers may not easily welcome our vulnerability into conscious awareness. One of my intentions for our meetings was not just to foster increased

awareness of our own relational patterns by learning about interpersonal neurobiology, but to open to the possibility of actual change at the implicit level where our early attachment experiences are held. Because of the way we continually shape one another's neural circuitry, something was sure to happen during our long experience with one another.

Groups can be as much a hideout from vulnerability as an opening into it, especially when there is no structure that requires each person to speak regularly, so it became important to imagine ways that safe vulnerability could be invited into our midst. We began with introductions, asking each person (including me) to share a bit about him or herself (mostly a left hemisphere task), what s/he was wanting from this year (possibly a combination of right and left), any concerns or fears that might be present (potentially more in-the-moment and right-centric), and one strength s/he brings to offer to the group (if vulnerability is arising, potentially as much a right-brain task as sensing fears). The first two or three people gave a pretty straight-forward left-centric offering for all the categories – exactly what is wise when waters are unknown. However, by the fourth or fifth person, a shift began to occur – one possibly fueled by the interpersonal environment that was beginning to develop. It turned out that the group members had quite a capacity for attuned listening, and the felt sense of that began to pervade the room. I was also consciously aware of holding openness, curiosity, and warmth for all that was happening, making my own contribution to the environment. How we are present or not present shows up in our faces, voice tone, posture, gaze (Schoore, 2009 - all of which are communicated to our safety awareness system (mostly below the level of conscious awareness). When there is this neuroception of safety (Stephen Porges' [2007] term for how we sense safety before we perceive it), our attachment circuitry becomes available for neural change. We had very quickly arrived at some degree of safe vulnerability, held by the group, and my inner delight at this no doubt expanded this a little more. The dance-like quality of this opening where each new advance provides the fuel for someone else to take the next steps is beautiful to experience.

This does not mean that everyone in the room was comfortable, felt included, or was glad to be there in their heart of hearts because such increases in vulnerability can also be frightening, especially when they happen so quickly. By the time we had made our way around the circle, there had been tears, laughter, people leaning into one another as well as indrawn energies and downcast eyes – really an increasingly full spectrum of human emotion being openly revealed. It was clear we were on our way into the vast expanse of attachment exploration, being touched in both our joy and sorrow. One of the most important aspects of this early work was the intention to accept all that was coming into the room without an expectation that everyone to be comfortable. Because of the omnipresent activity of our resonance circuitry and the power generally given to the group leader, it was especially important for me to be able to hold both the comfort and unease with equal regard, not just as a mental exercise, but in the actuality of my embodied experience.

To support the further opening of this nonjudgmental space, we moved into a two-part practice together. I introduced a particular sequence of meditative experience that can expand our capacity to be present with our clients (or anyone else) by developing two kinds of neural circuitry. We may begin with a familiar breathing practice by finding ease in our bodies and then focusing our attention on the sensation of the breath in the nostrils, or the rise and fall of chest or belly, wherever our attention can most easily remain that day. When the mind wanders, which it surely will, we may bring it back with gentleness to the breath. This practice develops the circuitry of focused attention, essential for our capacity to stay with our clients and one another.

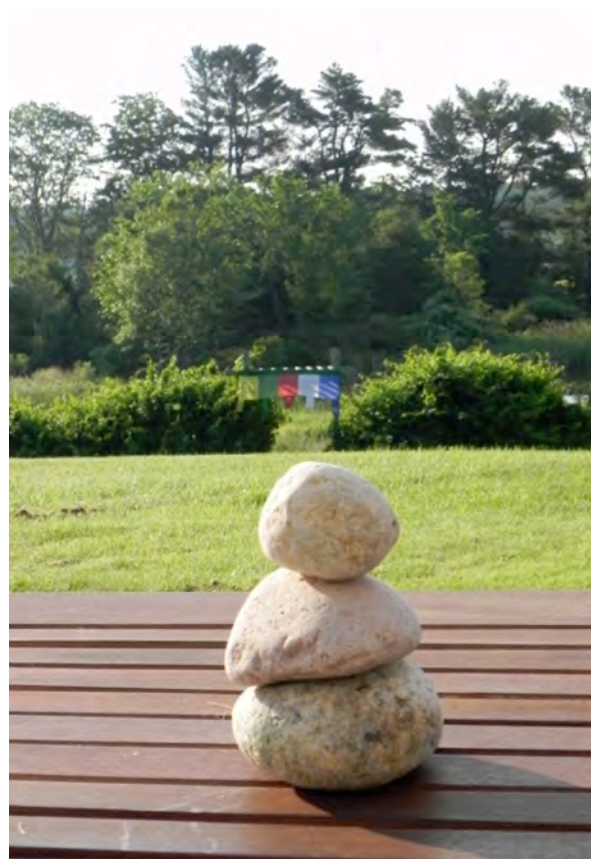
After several minutes of this practice, taking a slightly deeper breath, we may open our awareness into a bowl of receptivity, kind and nonjudgmental, welcoming all that is arising within our thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations as well as anything coming into our senses from the external world. We might experience something of this state of mind by opening our arms, a gesture that seems to happen spontaneously when I do this practice in groups. Many people report a sensation of warmth and expansion in the chest as they move from the arrow-like focus of the first part of the meditation to the second part. This practice begins to activate

the circuitry of compassion as we foster a nonjudgmental *relationship* with these various aspects of our experience. This sense of welcome and acceptance has elements of secure attachment within it, and if we are in this state of mind when our clients come to us, we offer them the opportunity to connect with us more quickly than if we are distracted, distant, or on guard. In our group, this practice had a twofold purpose – to develop this nonjudgmental capacity on behalf of our clients, and, perhaps more importantly, to nurture a sense of care for our own inner world as a means of creating internal and external safety – one condition for increasing openness and vulnerability within the group. We would practice this along with several other kinds of meditative experience throughout our year together.

While we were going to spend time with many aspects of interpersonal neurobiology, the core for us would be implicit memory, attachment, and the multiple states of mind we could call inner community (Badenoch, 2008, 2011) – all right-centric, relational concerns. Over the last ten years, I have become convinced that this is the heart of therapy. We carry our woundedness mostly in the right hemisphere limbic region, and we heal those wounds in the rich interpersonal environment of right-to-right communication (Badenoch, 2011; Schore, 2009). Yet, left-centric therapies have dominated the last decades, and our training programs have far more of a didactic than nurturant bent to them. They are perhaps following the trend of our society, a world that has largely become dominated by left-hemisphere processes (McGilchrist, 2010). In a left-dominant world, we rely on words and concepts to know where we are, judge people by their behaviors, and find that relational concerns are secondary to the practical issues of how do I get what I want?

When left dominance becomes great enough, we are cut off from the resources of empathy, attunement, connection, and presence in the moment. McGilchrist would say that we have arrived at that time as a society. No matter how much we therapists seek to remain in the relational flow, we are all touched by the culture in which we bathe every day. At the same time, if interpersonal neurobiology teaches us anything, it is that these relational qualities are at the heart of how we build one another's brains.

Getting centered in a particular perspective is an important part of the culture of a learning group, so we read McGilchrist in preparation for our first meeting. After discussing the ideas a bit, we focused on their meaning for us. Would it be possible for us to have an intention to cultivate a more right-centric view of how we wish to be in the world, as well as how this particular learning experience might unfold? We agreed that one of our tasks was to move away from the prevailing societal tide. In this group, we would be consciously cultivating right-hemisphere ears in order to truly listen to our own experience (and then the experiences of our clients). The components of implicit memory – bodily sensations, behavioral impulses, emotions, perceptions – all come to us through the gateway of the body, often arriving with a feeling of meaningfulness that is very different from what our left hemisphere guessing mind offers us. So we would be open to listening to our bodies as they whisper to us about our unfolding implicit experience. We might learn to trust that we can drop a question into the right hemisphere and simply wait for an answer to emerge (rather than shoveling around in the left). We would pour ourselves into sand trays and draw with our non-dominant hands to give our right hemispheres a way to speak directly. We might find ourselves feeling tentative, unsure, on unsteady ground,



or even floating about in a sea without words – that’s what it can be like when we open ourselves to the moment-to-moment processes of the right. So it became particularly important to forge strong bonds to carry us through the potential discomfort of this transition in awareness.

One central piece for this was everyone pairing up into Listening Partnerships for the year. This is a delicate process that already begins to stir up our attachment circuitry around the issue of chosen/not chosen. Will I play it safe and pair up with someone familiar – or take a chance on someone new? I don’t know anyone here – who will want me? We spoke about this, at least bringing the potential discomfort into our group awareness so we could hold it, be with it, no matter what shape it took – and all found partners. I made the suggestion that they communicate with one another during the two-month gaps between our meetings, believing that the variability in being able to follow that suggestion might well reflect emerging attachment patterns. At every turn, we were talking about becoming more aware and holding a nonjudgmental space for whatever we notice – including our inclination to be judgmental.



I don’t remember a great deal about the content I offered that first day – probably a good sign since what I retained instead is the feeling of being with this deepening group. By the end of the first day, a person came to me and said, “This isn’t going to be a typical training, is it?” Having come in with a few intentions and a large amount of uncertainty since I knew hardly anyone in the group, I just smiled and felt grateful. With another group of people, things might have shaped themselves quite differently. There is always a mutual adaptation between the group and the leader, especially when there is less focus on content and a less than clearly defined process in place. I had laid out rough topics

for the six meetings, had right-centric aspirations for where we were going, and that was about it. I believe that the maturity and warmth of the woman who gathered this group played a role in how open the participants were, and that the retreat setting created a quiet that let us more easily move away from a left-dominant stance.

The second day of our first weekend was given over to person (as opposed to “case”) consultation. I had offered guidelines for people to bring as much of a living sense of their client into our midst as possible. Instead of “56-year-old Caucasian male...,” I suggested, “When I meet with Dan, I immediately notice that I feel warm toward him...” It helps so much to begin to be able to see, hear, and feel both people in the room. Because I believe that early implicit wiring is almost always at the root of the difficulties that our clients bring (Toomey & Ecker, 2007), I requested that we hear some history, and beyond that, we would be most interested in experiencing what it is like to sit with this client. Including both therapist and client as a two-person system of equals grants respect for the truth that the implicit attachment experience is present and active in both. After the history, we would all be together with the relationship being shared, expanding the sense of being safely held in whatever might emerge next. So often, consultation has a tendency to back up and take a disinterested stance, focus on interventions and advice, and generally take the right-hemisphere life out of the encounter. Since hopefully this isn’t what’s happening in the counseling room, this kind of consultation really doesn’t offer much support for the actual therapeutic process.

The first person to bring her clients to us decided to sit right next to me on a little stool, and began to share about a father and son who were involved in difficulties with the law. We took a few minutes to understand the history here, both between parent and child, and particularly the father’s earlier life circumstances. At an intellectual level, the difficulties made sense in light of the history. However, this particular situation was touching anger and anxiety in this therapist in ways that were difficult for her to tolerate. Seeking to keep equal regard for both father and son, she found herself instead having a great struggle to not openly align with

the young man, being aware that she was no doubt telegraphing her dislike to the father. From time to time, I glanced at the group, sensing a deepening connection and intention to hold this emotional intensity for the most part, along with some discomfort shown in eyes and posture. It was a lot to hold at this early juncture.

Shifting away from the father and son, we focused on her embodied experience in this moment, and she found shame at her inability to hold them was the most present emotion. When this depth of feeling flows spontaneously in the room, what is there to do but be present, to honor its arrival? All of us have known these moments in our therapeutic lives, and there was enough strength within this budding group to feel that together and provide a safe space for this moment of deep honesty to be held. I noticed that my breathing had deepened some and I was leaning closer to the brave one next to me. After a bit, she said a few more words, straightened, looked out at the room, and let us know she felt much more settled. This significant sense of letting go said to me that we had been able to be present, right hemisphere to right hemisphere, in a way that allowed her system to reorganize itself a bit. We were new at this, so there were a few suggestions about possible interventions, then a quiet voice from someone in the group saying maybe that wasn't so important right now. We talked a bit about how those suggestions might be more about settling our own internal stirrings than giving guidance to the therapist, and how that's a legitimate need we have at times.

Two more people brought their clients that day, and thanks to what unfolded with the first person, we had a paradigm for working deep in the implicit experience of the therapist. Several who have presented over the months have said that their moments of presentation have changed them in some profound ways. I didn't craft this, didn't necessarily expect it, was open to it when it arrived, and grateful for it when we were finished each day. Why might it have happened this way? Complexity theory – both our individual brains and groups of brains are complex systems – says that initial conditions and organizing principles will create parameters that will influence how the unpredictable chaos unfolds along the way. Even in the introductions, together we had found our way toward deeper seeing, made some sort of agreement that we were setting sail for uncharted right-centric waters, and would explore ways to stick together through it all. As we parted from the first weekend, we each shared a word about where we were in that moment. Words such as grateful, tired, full, unsettled, dropped into the respectful silence as we each held one another right where we were.

I came away from that weekend filled with a quiet sense of something important happening, and returned two months later with even fewer notes for what I might say and a greater sense of following whatever might come into the room. I did have the intention that we would continue to revisit our previous experiences so they might deepen, a rough intention to stay in the territory of attachment the second weekend, and quite a bit of confidence that the group would find its trajectory within that.



**Bonnie Badenoch** delights in sharing the felt sense of interpersonal neurobiology with students, fellow clinicians, and anyone who is interested. She is on the Advisory Board of GAINS, teaches at Portland State University, writes books about IPNB, and travels about sharing her sense of implicit memory, attachment, and the foundational “we” at the center of our being and life. Convinced that longer and deeper immersion in these experiences is wonderful, she offers retreats and year-long programs in Portland, Oregon, with co-conspirators, Sarah Peyton, Kate Cook, and Coease Scott. Her website [nurturingtheheart.org](http://nurturingtheheart.org) has more information and ways to make contact.

Siegel, D.J. (2012). *Pocket guide to interpersonal neurobiology: An integrative handbook of the mind*. New York: Norton.

### **First Steps with a Transformational Learning Group: Inviting the Implicit**

- Badenoch, B. (2008). *Being a brain-wise therapist: A practical guide to interpersonal neurobiology*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton.
- Badenoch, B. (2011). *The brain-savvy therapist's workbook*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton.
- Cozolino, L. (2010). *The neuroscience of psychotherapy: Healing the social brain*. New York, NY, W. W. Norton.
- McGilchrist, I. (2010). *The master and his emissary: The divided brain and the making of the western world*. London: Yale University Press.
- Porges, S. W. (2007). The Polyvagal perspective. *Biological Psychology*, 74, 116-143.
- Schore, A. N. (2003). *Affect dysregulation and disorders of the self*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton.
- Schore, A. N. (2009). Right brain affect regulation: An essential mechanism of development, trauma, dissociation, and psychotherapy. In D. Fosha, D. J. Siegel, & M. Solomon (Eds.), *The healing power of emotion: Affective neuroscience, development, and clinical practice* (pp. 112-144). New York, NY: W. W. Norton.
- Siegel, D. J. (1999). *The developing mind: How relationship and the brain interact to shape who we are*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Toomey, B., & Ecker, B. (2007). Of neurons and knowings: Constructivism, coherence psychology and their neurodynamic substrates. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, 20(3), 201-245.  
doi:10.1080/10720530701347860

### **Experiencing Trauma and the Arc of Recovery**

- Arden, J. B. (2010). *Rewire your brain: Think your way to a better life*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Butler, L.D. Blasey, C.M., Garlan, R.W., McCaslin, S.E., Azarow, J., Chen, X.H., . . . Spiegel, D. (2005). Posttraumatic growth following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001: Cognitive, coping, and trauma symptom prediction in an Internet convenience sample. *Traumatology*, 11, 247-267.
- Cahill, L. & McGaugh, J. L. (1995). A novel demonstration of enhanced memory associated with emotional arousal. *Consciousness and Cognition* 4(4), 410-421.
- Calhoun, L. G. & Tedeschi, R.G. (2006). *Handbook of posttraumatic growth: Research and practice*. New York, NY: Erlbaum.
- Carter, C. S. (1998) Neuroendocrine perspectives on social attachment and love. *Psychoneuroimmunology*, 23(8), 779-818.
- Cassidy J. & Shaver P. R. (2008). *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research and clinical applications*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Cordova, M. J., Cunningham, L. L. C., Carlson, C. R., & Andrykowski, M. A. (2001). Posttraumatic growth following breast cancer: A controlled comparison study. *Health Psychology*, 20, 176-185.
- Davis, C. G., Wortman, C. B., Lehman, D. R. & Silver, R. C. (2000) Searching for meaning in loss: Are clinical assumptions correct? *Death Studies*, 24, 497-540.
- Doidge, N. (2007) *The brain that changes itself*. New York, NY: Viking.
- Dubuc, G., Phinney, S., Stern, J., & Havel, P. (1998). Changes of serum leptin and endocrine and metabolic parameters after 7 days of energy restriction in men and women. *Metabolism Clinical Experimental*, 47(4), 429-34.
- Ecker, B., Ticic, R., Hulley, L., & Neimeyer, R. (2012). *Unlocking the emotional brain: Eliminating symptoms at their roots using memory reconsolidation*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Elliott, S. S., Keim, N. L., Stern, J. S., Teff, K., & Havel, P. J. (2002). Fructose, weight gain, and the insulin resistance syndrome. *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, 76(5), 911-922
- Elsworthy, S. (2012) *Fighting with non-violence*. Presentation to TED April, 2012. Retrieved from [www.ted.com/talks/scilla\\_elsworthy\\_fighting\\_with\\_non\\_violence.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/scilla_elsworthy_fighting_with_non_violence.html).
- Erikson, E.H. (1968). *Identity: Youth and crisis*. New York, NY: Norton.