



Ellen Gayda is the founder of BodyWord®, a creative body psychotherapy. Ellen has an extensive background in the holistic healing arts, Gestalt, and Zen training and various massage and energy therapies. BodyWord® helps clients translate somatic emotional awareness into an embodied language of meaning.

Serge Prengel, LMHC is the editor the *Relational Implicit* project (<http://relationalimplicit.com>).

The following is a transcript of the original audio. Please note that this conversation was meant to be a spontaneous exchange. For better or worse, the transcript retains the unedited quality of the conversation.

Serge Prengel: Well, "BodyWord." That sounds a little bit like "Body Work," but it's "BodyWord." Would you just say something about the name?

Ellen Gayda: Well, the name came literally out of the core of my own body. One day, I returned from a session with a client who had initially called and said, "I just need some body work." And once this client came into see me, within moments, it became very evident that the emotional content that he was holding in his body was far more pressing and shaping his physical distress. And so, as I was leaving, and basically speaking to myself out loud, I found myself saying, "This session wasn't about body work, it was about body word." And the nuance of that turns out to be quite huge when you're actually working with someone who is holding in a lot of emotions. So that's the origin of the word.

S P: And in a way it's also alluding to the 2 two strings of influence in your work; the body and the words.

E G: Absolutely. I consider myself a "weaver," and the word "string" is very accurate because I do find myself holding a lot of different threads, or strings, of people's history and present moment experiences...and the ways in which they're expressing or not expressing, and trying to hold all that together in a very present way. It's pretty characteristic of the way I work.

S P: So maybe that invites the question of, "Would you give us an idea of what a session with you is like?"

E G: Typically someone may come in who may not know me. I'll start with someone who may not know me...and they come in complaining about a physical condition, because I do have a background as a massage therapist, also. And without realizing that there's an emotional component involved, I'll begin asking them to describe what they're feeling in their body. And as they're describing what they're feeling in their body, and they're still fully clothed, sitting on a seat before me, I can help them to begin experiencing awareness in their body...and how the awareness is also connected to something that's carrying on in their life right now. And a lot of people don't make that connection, you know, they just got off the phone and had a very stressful conversation that activates or triggers another memory and another range of emotions. So they may think

they're just coming in for one reason, and it all gets pulled in together. And by bringing it all to consciousness while we're speaking, and then while they're on a massage table, I take them deeper into the awareness that they're holding. And shifts occur in the body that become more permanent...because of that conscious integration of how their body has been imprinted and shaped and formed by that experiential conversation that may have just happened a day or an hour before. So that's one of the ways I work, and then, on the other hand, I have lots of people who may come in who are very conscious that I do this kind of work. And they may come in knowing that they can't clarify what it is exactly, but they're aware that there's an emotional component. And yet they're also aware that they're holding it in physically, and it's affecting their capacity to be present or to concentrate, or their energy level, or even their health. I work with a lot of people who have physical health conditions. So the range of clientele varies, and their self-awareness also varies.

S P: Yes. So what you're describing is that the "word" part is when people describe their symptoms or describe the situation. And then as they are on the massage table, and you touch their body, they become more aware of what happens at the body level, and shifts start happening.

E G: That's very much what occurs, as well as the "word" itself becomes activated. When I am holding someone, in terms of touch, on the massage table, and I have them bringing their awareness to that part of themselves...and I begin to engage them in a dialogue or ask that part of their own body to dialogue with me, what happens is I begin to hear the words that are coming out of the subconscious field of the body. And as they hear the words themselves that carry personal meaning, they begin to realize that those words have literally become substantiated,) and to a certain degree add to the formation of the self. So the "spoken word" itself, at times, becomes enlivened because of the physical contact. And people start to listen to the words they're choosing, as well as how they're responding to the dialogue between us.

S P: So what you're describing is that, in this process, people are starting to be able to relate to words not just as concepts, but to also have a body resonance for the word.

E G: Absolutely. And to me, the goal—if there is such a goal in the moment-- is to create a congruency between what one is saying with what one feels, and how the body actually substantiates, supports, and is holding that personal truth.

S P: Mm hmm. So Ellen, would you maybe give an example, a recent example, of some specifics of what happens with that kind of resonance?

E G: Okay...

S P: It's not always easy to remember just in the moment what happens during sessions, but if something like that pops up, it might be helpful.

E G: Okay. One example I'm having...and it speaks to what I just said, as well as something more, which may lead into more conversation. I had a colleague come in who was planning on taking the doctoral license and board in psychology. And as she was preparing for this, she was speaking about how she felt overwhelmed...and so I had her lie on the massage table and tried to help her to relax and release some of this sense of stress of studying all this factual information she needed. And as I was helping her breathe in her body and bring her awareness into her body, she just started saying that she didn't feel like there was enough room, and she felt somewhat claustrophobic. So at that

point, I invited her to get up off the table and to imagine that the therapy room we were in was her body. And I asked her to begin to visually and physically move through this room that felt suffocating, and open the windows and clear out the space. And keep in mind, that as she's doing this in an exterior way, through gesture, I also feel she is resonating completely with her interior sense of self. And she was able to successfully do it. And she expressed that her heart had an extraordinary experience of being in the present...mobilizing this stress and moving it, and at the same time feeling how it was directly affecting her interior experience. And by the time the session was over, she felt quite open again, balanced and grounded, and able to move freely within herself...and therefore, not feeling any sense of stagnation or overwhelming...ness.

S P: So Ellen, I just want to ask a couple of questions about that. What you're describing is that the client at the beginning felt a sense of overwhelm and stagnation and claustrophobia. And as you made a suggestion for her to move, or to imagine, she was moving inside the room as if inside her body. And in doing that, what happened to her is that she became able to feel a different sense of self, to feel a different sense of what she was doing.

E G: Right. And I think what happens is...my experience is that an awful lot of people never mobilize the body or feel they have the option to truly activate a change that's occurring within them through a creative means, such as such a type of movement...and to sort of shift back and forth between the metaphor that can be externalized in expression, and the interior "metaforms" that are occurring in the self.

S P: So the experience is not just to use metaphors as words or as concepts, but as feeling it by feeling the movements...

E G: Feeling the movements, feeling the form, and being able to know that one is always capable of shifting and shaping and reshaping the form...the metaform and the form. That is what we are as creative intelligences. We aren't stuck in our body; we're not stuck in anything. And we can move...and we are the architects of our own thoughts and our own self. And my experience in therapy is that often, people have not given themselves any license to have these types of options that come out of the creative intelligence...that allow you to be forceful, and be the warrior, be playful, and be the magician. If you look at Jungian psychology and the archetypes...to be able to access one's imagination can very much help shift an energetic block within the cells. And I do this a lot with people who have all kinds of restrictions, whether it's from physical illnesses, or mental...teaching people how to take license to use their creative imagination to heal and shift themselves.

S P: So what I'm hearing you say is that when you see somebody who is feeling trapped or limited in a certain role, you help them use their imagination to shift to a different archetype, and to experience what it's like to inhabit the form of that archetype.

E G: Exactly. In fact, I'm working with a young man now who has Asperger's, and he has healthy frame of reference to the theater and enjoys that a great deal. So one of the ways that I've been teaching him to relate and feel more into other people's emotions is to take on the role of these other people. And by doing that, he has no problem himself feeling his own sensitivity, because the nature of that condition is that it's very hard to feel someone else's. But by me understanding his love for theater, I'm able to get him to actually take on the positioning and the gesturing, and eventually have him come into the embodiment of the feeling of someone else. And this is all

happening out of watching, tracking his interests and his awareness and his limitations. And by finding that thread, I'm helping him to actually experience what it's like to be someone else, and therefore more empathetic, which is what he suffers mostly from.

S P: Yeah. So, in other words, as he plays other people and he becomes them, then he's able to experience what its like to be them.

E G: Right. And that's very much not an intellectual experience, but a very gestural way of learning it. So that's another example. So I work with touch, and I work with movement, and I work with helping one to take one's interior experience and externalize it so they can mobilize and move their body through something that may otherwise feel intangible or inaccessible.

S P: Yeah.

E G: I've done this a lot with people who have physical illnesses also.

S P: So would you maybe give me an example of that?

E G: Well, when I sometimes work on the massage table, and I become aware a person is holding a certain kind of trauma in their body, and I can help them...a lot of times these traumas are still held very much in the unconscious and subconscious, and there are symptoms that are emerging in the form of disease or chronic immune disorders. And as I help someone to experience what they're feeling, the next step for me is to help them begin the process of self healing. And to do that, I'll help them bring their attention to that area, and ask them to enter into that area that feels so blocked or cut off or distant or removed. And, again, I'm appealing to their own soul qualities also, to say, "What does this part of yourself really need right now?" And I ask them to breathe that awareness and imagination and empathetic experience into that part of themselves...and then to listen and see how that part of themselves responds, softens, shifts, opens. And it's very slow and tedious, detail work because it's very intimate. And the subtlety of being that sensitive, and staying with someone who is working that closely with a part of themselves they've been completely shut down from, ultimately brings about a change.

S P: Yeah, so what you're describing is very much that process of, again, seeing the resonance and practicing appealing to the imagination, practicing these different shapes, and checking the resonance to make a change in the person.

E G: Right. My hands are very sensitive. And so I can feel, when I just am gently touching someone, I can feel also, as you said, the word "resonance." I can feel the resonance; I can feel if part of their being is softening and opening, or staying restrictive and closed, and heavy or dense. So I can also help guide that process for them because the body is very attuned to knowing when someone's hands are sensitive and in tune. So there's a safety that is perceived on a nonverbal level that also assists a person in being able to relax deeply into themselves, and feel that it's safe to do so. So, I play that role also with them.

S P: So one of the ways you pay attention to things, to what happens during the session, is touch and how sensitive your hands are. Is there anything else that happens...what else of you is engaged, what is tracking the client, tracking yourself...what's it like for you to be in a session?

E G: Well, I'm very conscious, for myself, of my own capacity to entrain with my clients. And I've learned to read my own responses and reactions as information that is helpful...because I can make the translations very quickly. When I begin to feel a certain density that my hands may have sent, then I'm feeling that in myself. And because I know how to access my own creative intelligence to respond or dialogue with them, I can then help the client, as a way of moving through that...to breathe into some part of themselves that feels so tense, or what have you. So I refer back to myself a lot. I'm also highly intuitive. So just through touch, and through listening again, to the resonance of the word, I get a very clear sense and images of what it is to be that individual. And while I'm doing all this, I'm staying very grounded, which is really essential.

S P: So what helps you stay grounded during a session as you actually...you know, on the one hand you're pulled into getting this sense of what it is to be the other person, so what helps you stay grounded in yourself?

E G: I don't know...that's a great question! I don't know! I think maybe what helps me stay most grounded, because I am a bit of a mystic, is that I live an extremely organic life, and have since I've been very young. I have related to my body as a responsibility to attend to, at such a level that I'm very conscious of the food I put in my body...and I am aware of a lot of the sensory information that comes in and how my soul's body drinks that up. So I think I am pretty protective, at some level, of how I am moved or how I am informed, and what I allow to come into me or not. I have a high acute awareness of my body's self, and I've always used and looked at food as medicine...and I'm an herbalist so I've worked with herbs as a way to keep myself healthy and balanced. And I think because that is such a personal approach to my own health and healing process, the groundedness must come from that type of integrative use of the world around me.

S P: Yeah, it seems like you have a very profound respect for your body and for yourself.

E G: Yeah, I think so. And I've worked a lot with women, and I've enjoyed that always because I think there's a tremendous number of women who have been cut off from their body one way or another...whether it's been through trauma or just the externalization of self as image and what their investment in that image means, and how to move, and be confident and sexual, and balanced. So I've worked a lot of years with women, which I think gave me a grounded nature of comfort in the body.

S P: So do you want to say something about what led you to develop this kind of work? What's your background and how did you come to do what you do?

E G: Well, I was awakened fairly early as a teenager by studying yoga and meditation for four years daily. And what occurred as I entered into this consciousness-raising discipline was that I just learned about going dimensionally within myself, by tracking my own breath and my own awareness of my breath through movement. And out of that, a whole realm of visualization and imagery emerged. While I was doing this, I was in college, and I studied the psychology of the creative process. And in the course of doing that, I started studying how I actually track my own creative process, and I developed a format, which years later, oddly enough, became "mind mapping." But in 1973, at that point, there was no known thing, and I had amassed so much information in the thesis I was working on, that the only way I could begin to disseminate any of it was by creating a huge visual mind map that looked like the solar system. And my professor at the time, Dr. Frank Barron at U.C.S.C., who was an expert on creativity, had said he'd never seen anything like it. Well,

what I can look back now and say is that this is the way I work with my clients. As they're sitting before me, they may be the central sun of the universe, the solar system, but all of their themes and myths and particulars begin to flesh out into the orbiting planets, so to speak. So I went on and became a massage therapist, and during the course of that time, interestingly enough, I had met 2 healers: one a Tibetan healer, and one a Philippine healer. And this is back in the '70s, and in both cases they actually recognized me as a healer, much earlier than I would have ever recognized myself as one. And they taught me energy healing. At the time there was no real language for it, but they awakened my sensitivity, my hands, at a level that profoundly changed the way I ever perceived the human body again, and the concept of contact. And then I studied for eight years at Japanese Tea Ceremony...and that was an interesting description of Zen awareness and facial awareness. It taught me, relationally, how to move and gesture and pay attention not only to myself, but in the ceremony, one has always a guest to whom you are serving tea...and going through this very ceremonial and symbolic process. And I did that for a long time at the Uransenke Tea School Kyoto, which is a worldwide school...there's one in Philadelphia. Then I became a gestalt therapist, and I did a three-year training in gestalt psychotherapy at Pennsylvania Gestalt Center. I also opened up three schools in holistic healing centers in the course of my life.

S P: So I can see how it's something that certainly was with you very early on, but grew on through a variety of different experiences.

E G: Right. And I keep weaving them together, you know?

S P: Yeah. So Ellen, as were coming to the end of this interview, is there something that you'd like to say as a conclusion?

E G: Hmm...just thank you for your time!

S P: Well I certainly enjoyed hearing about your process and how you have been weaving all of these different influences into something that's a very creative process.

E G: Well, I think what I am doing is what we are all doing, it's just a matter of some of us are doing it consciously. We are all the sum total of all of those threads that are either being woven into the fabric or being let loose, and I think part of the work of a therapist is to try to help people either weave those loose threads or tie them off...so that they're not just shredding and dangling.

 *This conversation was transcribed by Laura Shapiro.*

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