

# **Widening our lens, deepening our practice: An exploration of energy within the teachings of Virginia Satir**

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# SATIR INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

## *Research Article*

### **Widening Our Lens, Deepening our Practice: An Exploration of Energy within the Teachings of Virginia Satire**

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#### **Abstract**

This article seeks, through a deeper examination of Virginia Satir’s meditations, tapes, and writing, to bring greater attention to her concept of energy and how she applied this to her own practice. Satir frequently talked about centering and energy and acknowledged her unique way of seeing and being to a few close colleagues. Her meditations and comments about how she uses meditations *provide a clearer picture of her way of centering, and connecting with the universal life energy*, which was foundational to her way of being and engaging with clients and students. The article also draws from the teachings of Carl Rogers, Eugene Gendlin and colleagues, and Dora Kunz and Dolores Krieger (founders of Therapeutic Touch) to explore the under-lying assumptions of an energetic framework and more fully illuminate this aspect of Satir’s work. Through this review of her ideas and meditations, and excerpts from the author’s own experience with an energetic perspective, the goal will be to deepen awareness of therapists and their comfort with engaging clients through a more energetically focused lens.

#### **Keywords**

energy, life energy, universal life energy, spirituality, congruence, Virginia Satir, iceberg metaphor, presence

Virginia Satir's name, for those familiar with the Satir Model, has become synonymous with the terms: *life energy*, *life force*, *universal life energy*, and *spirituality*. These concepts and aspects were core to all of her work and being.

Satir's early days in Chicago (1945-1958) and later, in California, coincided with an evolving consciousness about vital life energy and body awareness in several areas. In 1972, *Therapeutic Touch*, a contemporary interpretation of several ancient healing practices (Krieger, 1993, p. 11), was being formulated and taught through the combined guidance of Dora Kunz, a scientist and psychic healer, and Dr. Dolores Krieger, a professor of nursing in New York University. The University of Chicago was the site of research with Carl Rogers, a psychologist, and founder of Person-Centered Therapy, and Eugene Gendlin, a philosopher and psychologist, as collaborators, around the most predictive aspects of effective therapeutic outcomes. This research concluded that clients who demonstrated an ability to experience their emotional reactions and processes in therapy in an experiential and bodily way, were predictably more successful in outcome measures (Gendlin, 1996, p. 2). As a follow up to that research, *Focusing*, a program to teach people the skills for connecting to this special kind of inward body awareness, was being taught, also in Chicago, by Gendlin as early as 1967. Clearly, these pioneers had an influence on each other, but the details of how this occurred are not so clear. In a question period of a tele-course held on February 25, 2016, Gendlin, now 89 years of age, stated he cannot be sure that he remembers meeting Satir, but he was well aware of her work and its similar qualities to focusing through her students that he met. Rogers and Satir moved to California in 1963 and the late 1950s respectively. The assumptions on which each of those therapies was based, were very similar to those articulated by Satir.

This paper, given that the core of every aspect of Satir's work and teaching was rooted in a deep sense of spirituality and life energy, seeks to focus primarily on the aspects that have potential to provide a greater understanding of how she worked and sought to prepare others to expand their awareness of centering, intuition, congruence, presence, and connecting with their own life energy. She used meditations, metaphors, body stances, and sculpting extensively to convey these ideas. The shaping of the lens that contributed to my own particular perspective and appreciation of these elements of her approach will be addressed initially, followed by a deeper exploration of each of these aspects, using her own words and examples.

## **My Journey with an Energy Perspective**

I had the opportunity to observe Virginia Satir working with a family on two separate occasions, in 1969 as a student, and again in the early 1980s. I was deeply moved by the connections she wove with, and between, family members, despite being in a very public setting; however, any hope of my adopting her style of working with clients felt far from my reach then, especially in light of my social work training. I read Satir's (1964) *Conjoint Family Therapy*, which expanded the way I viewed families. I began to study her work in greater depth in 2001, through the programs offered by the Satir Institute of the Pacific. My earlier studies of *Healing Touch* and *Therapeutic Touch* (part of my professional social work practice) several years after seeing her work in person were very helpful in enabling me to more fully appreciate the energetic approach she used and to see more of the many layers on which she was able to work her magic with families.

I was first introduced to *Healing Touch* while working at St. Paul's Hospital in Vancouver, and observing our physiotherapist offering *Healing Touch* to our dialysis patients. *Healing Touch* is an energy therapy in which practitioners consciously use their hands in a

heart-centered and intentional way ([www.healingtouchprogram.com](http://www.healingtouchprogram.com)). Having observed the significant impact this healing modality had on the comfort level of patients, I engaged in training to learn the principles and practice of Healing Touch and experienced for myself the profound impact not only for our patients, and on myself as I offered it. I moved to the BC Cancer Agency, 4 years later, and was required to learn a similar healing modality, Therapeutic Touch. (Healing Touch grew out of Therapeutic Touch, and is similar in many respects; however, Healing Touch can be more directive and structured. Recipients of either modality would likely feel very little difference).

I have offered Therapeutic Touch to patients and family members, taught staff and family members and set up a Therapeutic Touch clinic for cancer patients and their families, with trained volunteers, whom I supervised as an integral part of my social work practice there. The shift in perspective for me, in believing I could do this work, learning to quiet myself, and opening to universal life energy did not happen overnight. My belief system needed to significantly shift. Moving from a more cognitive and verbal focus in my work, to understanding how my intentions, a shift in my level of attention, and centering could make such a difference for others as well as myself, took time and practice.

### **Meditations, Centering, Spirituality**

Satir frequently referenced *centering* as an essential component of her practice. In her teaching, she began each session with a meditation. Satir's comments about this practice provide an important glimpse into the breadth and depth of her use of meditations:

In my meditations, the centering of the self is a preparation for an integration. My meditations are not just a journey or visualization, as many others seem to be. What I am working toward in all my meditations, is a higher sense of self-worth, a greater trust in the power of the self; and a grounding, anchoring and expanding of positive uses of our resources .... my meditations are not only integrative, but also take people to new places and levels of being. (as cited in Banmen, 2003, p. 2)

In addition to the role of meditation to support centering, Satir stated it is "an opportunity to have that luxurious experience of being totally with oneself" (as cited in Banmen, 2003, p. 3) and saw connection to self as a first step to prepare for connection to spirit and others.

Meditations have to come from a state of love .... Therefore, before I lead a meditation, I need to prepare myself to be in that state of love and caring ... so it is not only what you say, but what state you are in .... Most of the time, all I need to do is center myself, and I am connected with my inner source of energy, my life force. (p. 3)

In speaking of centering, she referred to quieting her mind, focusing on her heart and connecting with a power greater than herself, with the belief that this makes a difference in all that follows from that moment with a person. She stated through centering, self-awareness can be deepened and added self-awareness is an important component of use of self as therapist.

Kunz and Peper (1995), in *Spiritual Healing: Doctors Examine Therapeutic Touch and Other Holistic Treatments*, highlight the centering process clearly from a Therapeutic Touch perspective, which adds further clarity to our understanding Satir's process of centering:

Centering involved, first of all, the intent to be quiet within. It is the focusing of one's energies and attention to a place of stillness within one. One is not reacting to outward circumstances, but one turns to one's own sense of wholeness and oneness for a moment. This leads to a sense of being integrated .... Slowly a sense of peace and integration is experienced. Often an intuitional insight can occur .... One's intent is enhanced and clarified and so one is more likely to be effective in one's therapeutic encounter. (p. 253)

Satir gave her whole self, body, mind and spirit, to her work and interactions with people. The spiritual nature of Satir's (1988) focus is clearly articulated in the following comment, in speaking about the high risk clients she had early in her private practice:

... many of these people began to blossom as the treatment proceeded. I think now that this happened because I was working to contact their spirits, loving them as I went along. The question for me was never whether they had spirits, but how I could contact them. That is what I set out to do. (p. 340)

"I consider the first step in any change is to contact the spirit. Then together we can clear the way to release the energy for going toward health. This too is spirituality in action" (p. 341).

### **Intuition**

It is challenging to separate out Satir's use of intuition from her references to centering, and her use of her body awareness as these flowed together for her seamlessly. She described the link for her between meditations and intuition: "I see meditations as a path to the intuitive part of ourselves which I feel is where everything emanates from" (as cited in Banmen, 2003, p. 3). Her ability to access a deep level of intuition was exceptional. She stressed to her students that being centered was essential to developing one's intuition, and that centering helped reduce fears and doubts. She also advocated using centering several times a day, not only when working with clients, but as a way of encouraging our intuitive aspect (Satir, 1980, DVD 38).

Satir shared with close colleagues as far back as the early 1970s, that she had abilities to see and feel information about a client and/or their situations in extraordinary ways. She also shared her hesitation about being very open about her special gifts of insight and how they informed her work, given the culture of psychology and therapy during her earlier professional years. Dr. Mary Jo Bulbrook, a doctoral student at the time of first meeting Satir in 1972, spoke of their discussions about energy healing, including Touch for Health and Therapeutic Touch, and of Satir's interest and ability to perceive information beyond the range of ordinary perception. Dr. Bulbrook reported giving her energy treatments at the end of busy teaching days (personal communication, June 24, 2016).

### **Cultivating Intuition**

An important visual image that can support one to gain greater self-awareness, is to cultivate a witness part, to track our thoughts, actions, feelings and beliefs. It may also be

referred to as the observer part, as distinct from the engaged active part. This aspect can be strengthened through meditation, to gain more awareness of, and control over, our thoughts, feelings and actions.

An example of intuition arising and being appraised is evident in a more intuitive moment I had with a client:

I was in a counselling session with a gentleman who had lost his wife recently. He was sharing a very heartfelt experience when I noticed that there was a hummingbird right above his head at the window behind him. What was particularly notable to me was that this window was on the second floor of a commercial building. There were trees nearby, but no flowers that would attract a hummingbird. In my 5 years in the office I had never seen a hummingbird at this window. At first it hovered, then actually touched the window, as if trying to get in. I was surprised, but hesitated to interrupt my client. It felt random, from one perspective, as I reflected on it, but very odd, from another perspective. When his speaking came to a natural break, I checked in with my deeper inner-knowing, and felt this was important to share with him. I tentatively described that while he was speaking I noted a hummingbird behind his head beyond the window. Immediately, he became emotional, and told me that he believed that was his wife who was trying to comfort him. He said he felt I would think he was crazy if he told me that he believed that the spirit of his wife came to him on his balcony, through the presence of a hummingbird who visited about the same time many days, and that he took comfort each time it appeared. He seemed relieved to be able to share the experience, and I reflected after how my observation, intuition and willingness to comment took our session to an entirely different level of revelation and meaning making for each of us. I risked in sharing that with him, but through touching into a deeper place within myself, I intuited that this could be important to him, even though it made little sense to me at the time. (Client unnamed, personal communication, May 2016; used with permission)

As we seek to cultivate a more centered way of being, and/or greater level of presence, exploring our beliefs and assumptions that may need to be shifted to incorporate those intuitive moments in a more cohesive and consistent way, can be helpful. It may also be important to look at the inner dialogue of the doubting part of us, that sees this as a chance moment, not a potentially integrated aspect of ourselves, and our therapy. Many of us have moments of insight that we may consider accidental or occasional, when we are able to sense into something important without clearly knowing why or how. Acknowledging our doubting inner part of oneself, helps to limit its power over us.

Satir does not directly address the challenges or importance of maintaining a centered state throughout a session but, in their teachings of Therapeutic Touch, Kunz and Krieger considered this to be very critical (Krieger, 1997). There are many things that can influence our inner messages that may seem somewhat counter culture, at first glance. Krieger and Kunz stressed the importance of keeping a watchful eye for the Four Dragons, which they referred to often in their teachings. Particularly, as students, when learning something new, one can try too hard, wanting to see something so badly that one could move from a more ego perspective than from a more centered spirit-based perspective. Kunz and Krieger named

these potential Four Dragons as: “Wishful thinking, Imagination, Fantasy and Exaggeration” (Krieger, 1997, p. 145).

As we try to acknowledge our *inner doubting part*, a quick check of whether we are centered, at a given moment in time, is an important starting place. A gesture or word of a client can shift us into questioning: “Am I doing this right or well?” We can also have stray thoughts about such things as whether we locked the door at home, or gave the next client the right time to come, that can shift us off a centered place. Checking in with the witness aspect of ourselves, what we are thinking, feeling or assuming at any point in time is vital in addressing the doubts. Meditation training, as mentioned above, can be helpful in developing the skill of being able to self-monitor, stay on focus more effectively for longer periods of time, and can help with discerning the validity of following through with intuitions or “a ha” moments as they arise with clients. One indication of whether we are centered is how we feel at the end of the session. If we are working from a centered space, connected to universal life energy, we feel quietly energized, not drained, as the flow of life energy moves through us.

An important aspect of widening our lens and paying more attention to our intuitive and spiritual messages is to carefully consider what we do with these messages when they arise. Do we share them directly with our clients, as I did with the hummingbird incident, or do we use them more indirectly in our decision making, therapeutically? My observation of watching tapes of Satir working with clients is that she took great care in what she shared and how she shared this *expanded* information she received about a client or their situation. She asked a lot of process questions, sometimes starting a sentence with: “What would need to happen for ...?” Overall, she appeared careful not to impose her intuited information directly or obtrusively on clients and chose to appeal to their wisdom and judgment in her careful and sensitive questioning. Her use of metaphors appeared to figure clearly here as a way to open up more awareness on the part of the client of what she was sensing about them.

## Metaphors

Satir (as cited in Satir, Banmen, Gerber, & Gomori, 1991) addresses how she uses metaphors extensively and speaks of metaphors as her adjunct therapist, as they helped shape her work with clients in such a profound way.

There are so many things that have to do with meanings in terms of human beings, and often language is a limiting factor. So when I want to get some special meaning across, I will bring in a metaphor. By using a metaphor, I can make space between whatever is and what I am trying to get across. (p. 259)

What I am most interested in is beyond the logical, to engage the intuitive to bring out the pictures, to bring out the sensing which gives juice to the form and possibly allows for deeper change .... I believe in and practice the use of sculpting, metaphors, and pictures to activate the whole brain and engage the whole person. (p. 261)

With metaphors, as with sculpting and pictures, Satir draws from multiple layers and aspects to help shift perceptions, and ultimately beliefs. She commented that she does not plan ahead what she will use in a session, but allows the images or metaphors to arise organically from her own centered state and life energy.

My observation of Satir's skillful use of metaphors is that they enabled her to offer clients as much control and ownership of the therapeutic process as possible, and to keep her wisdom from intruding on their process in an untimely or interfering manner (Satir et al., 1991). Her metaphors were deeply spiritual and creative in their intent, to help shift thinking, perceptions and or expectations folks had of themselves that could be seen as limiting. Satir appeared to use this tool with amazing precision and effectiveness, commenting that metaphors enable the therapist to engage the client more actively in the work at hand, to be able to assess what the client is able to see and accept, and to respect their client's process and timing, in the therapy. She recognized that metaphors operate at various levels simultaneously as different senses are evoked to support the intended message (pp. 259-267).

## Boundaries

Satir mentions boundaries most often when speaking about touching and her ability to sense the willingness of clients to engage in a certain way through her touch and their energy fields. Energy is visible in anger, fear, and other emotions, but this paper refers to energy in a deeply spiritual way. Satir refers to it as her life force and as *universal life energy*, a term that spans the deepest or highest elements in all religions, as a deep sense of compassion that envelops both self and others, and is not of oneself, but flows, in a centered state, through oneself to others.

Satir et al. (1991) state that:

We each have an energy field surrounding us, usually extending about eighteen inches from our bodies. At times we are open to having this boundary penetrated; at other times, we want people to respect this boundary. This is a felt sense, and close friends or therapists can be sensitive to it (as well as to their own boundaries). (p. 287)

To get a clear glimpse of what Satir et al. (1991) are referring to here, consider how close or far you prefer to stand to someone ahead of you in a line up, and your reaction when someone gets too close to you. You may have noted what almost universally happens in an elevator when a new person enters, after several persons are already in the elevator. Each person shifts so that there is as close to equal distance between each person as possible. There is information in our fields that others can sense, though it may be largely unconscious or intuitive.

The degree to which Satir was able to read those energy fields around people is clearly demonstrated in the videos of her working with families. Maria Gomori speaks of Satir's exceptional ability to sense the life force in plants and animals, also (personal communication, June 19, 2016). Satir speaks at one of her month-long workshops held annually of being able to feel the genetic history of a person through holding a client's hands "my hands tell me everything ... I use my hands as a barometer" (Satir, 1980, DVD 30). While most of us may not possess that ability to perceive another's history, through information in their energy field, I expect that all of us have more ability to see beyond our eyes and ears than we assume. This may have more to do with our beliefs and assumptions than our capability to see beyond the typical parameters of what is spoken or demonstrated visually.

Satir (1980) referenced having to learn about setting clear boundaries in one of the Quebec tapes, when she revealed that at one point early in her career, she decided she would end her life, because she did not know how to be with people and not be devastated by their experiences (DVD 66). She said it was as if there was no difference between herself and them



and as if she had to involve herself in their coping and decisions. The metaphor she used was she saw herself as having many breasts, and being drained dry from all of them. She thought she was doing good and being nice, but added she had the sense that she was dying. She added she realized she had been pouring milk into pails with holes in them. She stated it was as if she had been announcing to the world that she could be everything to everybody, and was omnipotent and omnipresent and added, “one day I made an apology to God for taking over” (DVD 66). It appears that this moment of awareness changed her way of viewing clients and her work significantly, given her references to the importance of being centered and honouring the gifts of her clients fairly early in her work and continuously through her writing and teaching.

Rogers (1989) has articulated the dangers of being so connected with a client that boundaries blur and there can be a greater sense of merging with the client. He stresses the importance of a clear sense of separateness and the ability to track oneself separately from one's clients. In the words of one of his workshop participants he highlighted this:

I felt the power of the ‘life force’ that infuses each of us ... I felt its presence without the usual barricades of ‘me-ness’ or ‘you-ness’ .... And yet, with that extraordinary sense of oneness, the separateness of each person present has never been more clearly preserved. (p. 138)

Gendlin (1996) states: “Contact is not merger; quite the contrary: it is the keen sense of the reality of the other person's presence as another being” (p. 291).

Banmen described this aspect of the therapeutic relationship, using the iceberg metaphor (Figure 1) when working with a client:

I am manifesting something at a higher level. I connect with the energy, but don't merge with the client, and am not taking on the vibrations of the client. It is like there are two icebergs connected at the core level, the level of self, the level of life energy. The energy at that level is the same energy. As a therapist, I don't have to experience the client's higher levels of the iceberg, such as their feelings or fear. I cannot help the client if I am connected at those levels; there needs to be separateness there. (personal communication, June 10, 2016)

Satir (1980) commented that “I never ask anyone to do anything until they are ready. Timing is very important in how you make trust” (DVD 29) and added the importance of being aware that we each have our own rhythm, and yet we can still be connected (DVD 3).

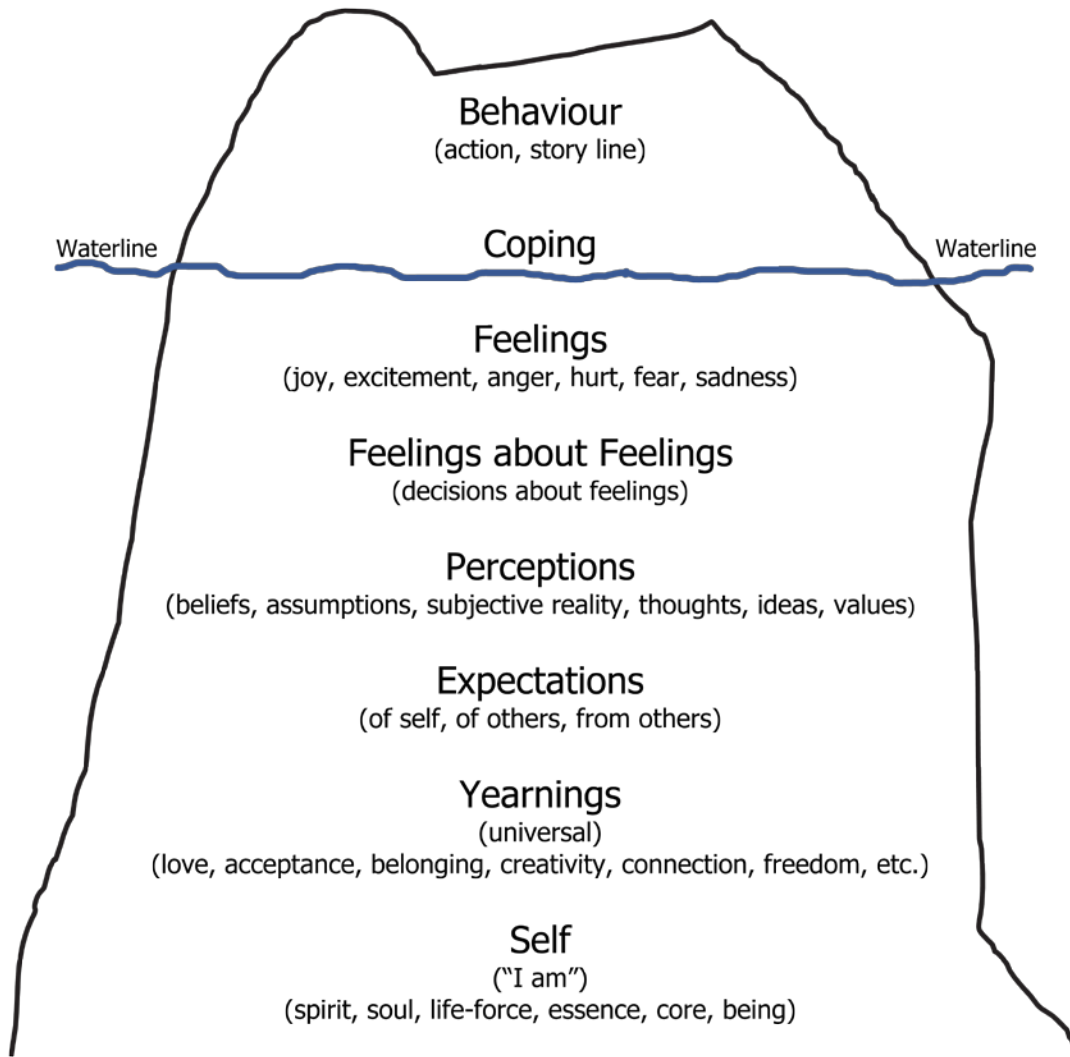


Figure 1. The personal iceberg metaphor. Adapted from *The Satir Model: Family Therapy and Beyond* by V. Satir, J. Banmen, J. Gerber, & M. Gomori, 1991. Copyright 1999 by J. Banmen.

### **Congruence**

Foundational to Satir's use of this intuitive and spiritually focused ability to interact with and support another, is her level of congruence. She spoke of three levels of congruence which evolved in her thinking over time. These reflect our level of self-esteem and ability to take full responsibility for our thoughts, beliefs, feelings and actions.

- Level 1 focuses on harmony with our feelings, accepting them and acknowledging them.

- Level 2 focuses on harmony with deeper levels of self, bringing our perceptions and expectations into harmony with our sense of self, so our communications are aligned with our inner experiences.
- Level 3 involves moving into harmony with our spiritual essence, or universal life force, spirituality or God, and focuses on our deeper level of self and connection to spirit. (For more information on these levels, see Satir et al., 1991, pp. 79-81)

Satir (1980) regarded congruence as the most important thing in helping people change (DVD 29). She offered a simplified definition of congruency: “to feel helpless, look helpless, acknowledge you are helpless, and ask for the help you need” (DVD 13), and in a later publication stated: “My means of making contact was in my own congruent communication and modeling that went with it” (Satir, 1988, p. 340).

Banmen and Maki-Banmen (2014) elaborate further on congruence and its role in the therapeutic relationship from the perspective of the Satir Model:

The congruence of the therapist is essential for clients to access their own spiritual *life energy*. When therapists are congruent, clients experience them as caring, accepting, hopeful, interested, genuine, authentic and actively engaged. In essence, the therapist is providing the conditions in which the client experiences some of their yearnings being fulfilled in the therapeutic relationship. This connects them experientially to their own *life energy*. (p. 127)

### **Cultivating a Deeper Level of Congruence**

The iceberg metaphor (see Figure 1), a metaphor for the self, lends itself as a tool to explore our level of congruence around our ability to honor our spiritual and intuitive side and to explore the level of alignment in our beliefs, values and assumptions. This could be explored by working with two icebergs, one representing our sense of *being in the flow*, where intuition comes more easily, even if momentarily, and the other one representing our internal state when being in the flow feels more absent, and we are doubting our intuitions. To illustrate the differences between these two states, the story of my client and the hummingbird, referenced above, was an example of my being in the flow, able to step outside my rational brain and sense into and act upon a deeper level of meaning, or intuition. Had I not been in the flow, I would have dismissed the presence of the hummingbird as a random event, and over ruled any sense of significance that came forth for me, in that moment. In referencing the Iceberg Metaphor, I would have explored the beliefs, expectations and assumptions that were factors in each of these two possible scenarios, to more clearly capture my internal state that was foremost in the decision and actions that followed in the particular situation. With this exploration, the beliefs, expectations and assumptions that relate to each of the two Icebergs become more obvious and more available to awareness, and to change.

This exercise may be one to revisit, ideally with someone also familiar with the Satir iceberg concept or metaphor. It can be a tool for meditating with, and exploring from time to time, especially after a time with a client where you felt very much in-the-flow, where you found yourself more heart centered, and more in touch with your intuitive aspect. It can be equally powerful when you are experiencing a time of feeling quite the opposite of being in the flow, when your therapy feels more like pushing a rock uphill, or moving with more effort.

At those times, a revisit of the iceberg, to look at the aspects of your internal state in that circumstance can bring greater awareness, and support movement to greater congruence.

## Presence

Language can be challenging when dealing in the metaphysical realm, such as an exploration of *presence*. The focus here is on a compassion that is palpable to those in the presence of someone who is centered and open to a power greater than oneself, in an intentional way. The concept of presence draws on all aspects of communication, body, mind and spirit, and conveys an attitude where the client's wisdom is inherently respected and elevated as an important contributor to the therapeutic process. Although Satir (2008a) does not reference the term presence often, the following quote conveys her sense of presence and its impact on therapy:

I have learned that, when I am fully present with the patient or family, I can move therapeutically with much greater ease. I can simultaneously reach the depths to which I need to go, and at the same time honor the fragility, the power and the sacredness of life in the other. (p. 220)

To put the concept of presence in context with centering, intuition, and congruence, I will use the metaphor of shining a spotlight. In centering, my sense is that the focus of that spotlight is on the self of the person. Intuition evolves from that process, as the spotlight shifts to encompass both the self and spirit. Presence, as I see it, shifts the spotlight to self, spirit and another, as it is the felt sense of the other that gives meaning to the concept of presence. Congruence, as I sense Satir conceptualized it, evolves from a centered and intuitive state, includes the response of the other (presence), and the achievement of a higher level of self-awareness of the therapist. Thus, the spotlight deepens and widens within the interaction, and the growing self-awareness of the therapist.

Maria Gomori, a co-author, close friend, and colleague of Satir stated that Satir's:

embodied presence and belief in the other person's life force evoked something powerful in those she was with, and that her intention was to help people to re-connect with their own life energy, and their own resources and strength to make new choices towards their dreams and growth. (personal communication, June 19, 2016)

She added, "The metaphor she often used is that all people have their own lights; she offers a match to light their own lights" (M. Gomori, personal communication, June 19, 2016). Carl Rogers (1989) has also articulated the elements of this more spiritual, intuitive, and heart-centered way as presence:

When I am at my best, as a group facilitator or a therapist, I discover another characteristic. I find that when I am closest to my inner, intuitive self, when I am somehow in touch with the unknown in me, when perhaps I am in a slightly altered state of consciousness in the relationship, then whatever I do seems to be full of healing. Then simply my *presence* is releasing and helpful. There is nothing I can

do to force this experience, but when I can relax and be close to the transcendental core of me, then I may behave in strange and impulsive ways in the relationship, ways which I cannot justify rationally, which have nothing to do with my thought processes. But these strange *behaviors* turn out to be *right*, in some odd way. At those moments it seems that my inner spirit has reached out and touched the inner spirit of the other. Our relationship transcends itself and becomes a part of something larger. Profound growth and healing and energy are present. (p. 137)

### **Cultivating a State of Presence: Assumptions and Beliefs**

Satir's references to being in a harmonious state embody the essence of presence, as addressed in the references above. It is a quality that can be felt and changes the interactions with others around them in a very significant, even if less conscious, way. Throughout the teachings of Satir, Rogers, Gendlin, Kunz and Krieger, there are references implying that this sense of presence can be described as both an art and a practice that can be learned or developed, where meditation, and willingness to become more self-aware, and connected with the universal life force within oneself, all play a part. This may appear, at first glance, to be simple and straightforward, but reaching that level of clarity, centeredness and spiritual state is, for most of us, not automatic. There are steps we can take to help us to move closer to that state, using our minds, hearts and spirits in the process.

A first step may be to look at our deepest beliefs and assumptions, both about ourselves, and about others, at our beliefs about the limits around what we, and others, can know, how information is shared between two or more people, how individuals can change and the true nature of people at their core. Gomori (2008) has articulated assumptions that support the Satir Model clearly in her book, *Personal Alchemy: The Art of Family Reconstruction*:

- Human beings are positive manifestations of life energy, and as such, they are sacred.
- We are born authentic and each child has a unique individual essence or life force, connected to the energy of the universe. This is our spiritual nature.
- People are basically good. (p. 29)
- We connect on the level of sameness and grow on the basis of our differences. (p. 29)
- Every living thing inherently moves toward balance and growth.
- Change in all living systems is ongoing. (p. 30)

Susan Wager (1996), a medical doctor, who practices and teaches Therapeutic Touch, articulates underlying assumptions that inform Therapeutic Touch, but are echoed in Satir's approach also: "There is a universal healing energy, available to all that has order as its basis .... There is an underlying unity among life forms: Our interconnectedness allows one person to help another" (p. 25).

How do these assumptions translate on the ground in our everyday actions and thinking? If we accept these assumptions, we can no longer coexist with the belief that our thoughts are totally our own. Our thoughts and beliefs may be perceived potentially by another, particularly to those paying close attention to us. When I worked at the Cancer Agency, I was often asked by a doctor to see her or his patient. The physician would state what he or she thought, followed by what had actually been said to the patient, which could be somewhat different. When I would approach the patient, they would clearly tell me what

the doctor had said, and, on an amazing number of occasions, patients could not only paraphrase what their physician thought, but often used the exact words that the physician was sure he or she had not communicated to the patient.

### Satir's Use of Body Awareness

Satir (2008b) references the body extensively when addressing the elements of centering, intuitions, metaphors, sculpting, boundaries and congruence. It is foundational to her way of connecting to universal life energy, observing, assessing and interacting with people. "We think the most important area of observation for the therapist has to do with body and behavioral clues. There are numerous simultaneous levels of observation around this data" (p. 205).

Satir (1980) speaks of the energy that comes out from hands, of hands as channels for giving energy, and points out that observing the body, including the face that shows everything and the voice that shows what integration is in the rest of the body as critical in assessment (DVD 8). She continues by naming the congruency of the body messages of each family member with their words, tone and quality of expression as a key factor in assessment, and the importance of the therapist observing one's own body posture, as a tool for assessing both what is happening in the session with the family, and also with the self of the therapist, in a particular moment (Satir, 2008b, pp. 205-206).

Satir (2008c) used the physical positions or stances as a shorthand way to view the ways in which people communicate with one another (p. 183). She comments further: "I have translated the various kinds of responses into body positions. Within a few moments, I am making mental pictures of the people in front of me and translating them into physical postures that represent their ways of communicating" (p. 183).

One can touch in all kinds of ways. In training therapists, I have told them that to develop "eyes and ears" in their fingers is important. People in families are touching all the time—slapping, pushing, shoving, holding .... So it isn't a matter of giving a touch; it's a matter of the message in the touch. (p. 184)

Sculpting, involves having clients form a physical pose or sculpt (body stance) to externalize the relationships between them and another. It is also a valuable tool used to support families to shift their perspectives around how they see power sharing, and resources within the family, and is a very important part of the change and transformation process. She was careful to assess the level of her connection with and permission from a client before touching and using sculpts. As with metaphors, timing, when using sculpting, is an important factor in realizing the potential of tapping into the well of body wisdom, and shifting perceptions and beliefs. "Satir developed physical sculpting poses, stances, in order to externalize the internal experience in a non-verbal manner to allow the body memory and wisdom to express itself" (Banmen & Maki-Banmen, 2014, p. 119).

Carl Rogers, and a colleague, Eugene Gendlin, collaborated on research of the elements of a therapy session which were consistent indicators of lasting and profound change in therapy. The conclusion of their research was that clients who demonstrated evidence of an experiential element, which Gendlin described as evidence of *bodily sensing* were found to show predictably more successful outcomes on outcome measures of therapy (Gendlin, 1996, p. 2). A Jesuit and colleague of Gendlin, Ed McMahon, (2011) referred to this

bodily knowing process as spiritual and the body as “a sacred conscious bridge or connection” (para. 3) connecting us to a greater source of wisdom beyond our own thinking.

Although Satir did not use those exact words to describe the centrality of the body as a spiritual connection and bridge to inner knowing, and greater awareness, and a greater source of wisdom beyond our own thinking, she mentions the importance of the body and its spiritual aspect frequently. In the Quebec tapes Satir (1980) said in a meditation, “imagine energies from the center of the earth and from the heavens moving through you and out through your arms to other people, in the group and in the world” (DVD 7), and in a subsequent tape she speaks of energy that comes from hands, and hands as channels for energy (DVD 8). She mentioned several times that focusing on the body first, in her assessment, gives her a clearer picture of the client’s internal world, before allowing the words clients are using to influence her assessment. Once she has tapped into the information she received from noting the bodily aspects, she states she used what a client says as a way for her to assess the level of integration the client has achieved between aspects of their iceberg (behaviour, feelings, feelings about feelings, perceptions, expectations and yearnings; see Figure 1).

## Summary

The aspects outlined to this point are part of a whole framework and separating them for this discussion is done only to illuminate certain aspects more clearly. All of these facets, the process of centering, the use of meditation, of metaphors, of sculpting, a sense of presence and the importance of congruence, interface with each other continuously. There is evidence of growth and shift in Satir’s articulation of her model over time, particularly regarding how she named the spiritual aspect and addressed the three levels of congruence. Satir may have used different tools and approaches at different times, but there was a consistent core and thread that governed their use in the service of healing for her clients. In her writing and teaching, she sought to bring these qualities and elements that she embodied within reach of her students and participants. She demonstrated consistently a deep sense of the care and importance of the potential inherent in the therapist’s level of self-awareness, connection to the universal life energy, and in the use of self in therapy. This quote was made public just one year before her death:

The whole therapeutic process must be aimed at opening up the healing potential within the patient or client. Nothing really changes until that healing potential has been opened. The way is through the meeting of the deepest self of the therapist, with the deepest self of the person, patient or client. When this occurs, it creates a context of vulnerability, openness to change. This clearly brings in the spiritual dimension. (Satir, 2008a, p. 221)

A fitting way to bring this exploration to a close while also acknowledging her gift of creativity, Satir’s words illuminate, simply and eloquently, the deeply spiritual perspective that was the hallmark of her approach to therapy and healing:

When I am completely harmonious with myself, it is like one light reaching out to another. At the outset, it is not a question of “I will help you.” It is simply a question of life reaching out to life. All life talks to life when it is in a harmonious state. If my ego is involved or if I need them to get well, then it is

a different story. This is one of the secrets of what I do, if there is a secret.  
(Satir as cited in Simon, 1989, p. 39)

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