Greg Johanson

Active Pause January 2011

Greg Johanson, Ph.D. has a background in therapy as well as theology. He is a member of both the American Psychological Association and American Association of Pastoral Counselors. In the field of somatic psychotherapy he is a Founding Trainer of the Hakomi Institute and editor of the Hakomi Forum. He has served on the Board of Directors of the USABP for many years, and on the editorial board of the Journal of the USABP. Greg has been active in writing, publishing over 150 items in the field of pastoral theology and psychotherapy, including (with Ron Kurtz) *Grace Unfolding: Psychotherapy in the Spirit of the Tao-te ching*. He has taught adjunct in a number of graduate schools, currently as Research Faculty of the Santa Barbara Graduate Institute of the Chicago School of Professional Psychology.

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: I'm with Greg Johanson. Hi Greg.

Greg Johanson: Hi.

S P: So, you're in very much Mr. Hakomi, aren't you?

GJ: (laughs) Yeah, I've been with Hakomi for many years, one of the founding trainers of the institute.
S P: How did you get to that? You started out in life being a minister, didn't you?
G J: Yeah I did. And well I think, like a lot of things in my life, it just all kind of evolved by mistake and one thing leads to another. Yeah I'm an ordained *United Methodist* minister and when I was doing theological training in Atlanta, I got into a lot of what's called clinical pastoral education and pastoral counseling. And that was all pretty much a psychodynamic approach, kind of influenced by Tom Malone, Carl Whittaker, and Harry *Stack Sullivan*, kind of a relational psychodynamic approach where the idea was that the relationship is the therapy. And I was heavily immersed in that. One of the things that was said without saying it was that that was the real stuff, and anything else was kind of froth on the water. But when we left Atlanta and went back to Oregon, I was involved in ministry there. My wife got involved in therapy by mistake with Don Nickerson, who had a pastoral background, that is I think the reason we went to him. It turned out he happened to be the best gestalt therapist in town and obviously did good work, so the experience of that kind of won out over the theory that it wasn't supposed to be any good. So I got deeply involved in experiential therapy, gestalt and bioenergetics, and psychodrama and so forth, and then Don had a center where one day he brought in Ron Kurtz, who had just published a book called *The Body Reveals*, a psychology of the body. So I watched him work, and there was obviously something really right about what he was doing. Myself and others, others who studied with him back then, this was like late 70's, asked him what he was doing, and he didn't exactly know. Because on the one hand he's a genius, literally, in math and physics and such things, but on the other hand he was working very

intuitively and spontaneously and drawing from all kinds of sources. He had a background in Buddhism, Taoism, and all kinds of things. So about that time, again a number of us invited him to study himself, kind of like it was the NLP days when the *Structure of Magic* was published. when they looked at master therapists to see what they're doing, to see if there is anything you can learn from it. So studying himself, and our studying him and so forth, over three or four years, we actually did discover that there was an underlying method that you could actually teach to other people, a linear method that goes along with keying off the spontaneous in the work. So anyway, when we finally figured out a method you could teach to other people, then the Hakomi Institute itself was founded in the early 80's and we started offering workshops and training *to other folks*. So I've been with it ever since.

S P: Yeah. So that's a very interesting story in a way that, for you personally, it was a triumph of experience over the logic of the training you had received. And in terms of Hakomi, it was very much observing the reality of this intuitive healing flow in order to discover the message in it, so in both cases very much sticking to the experience.

G J: Yeah very much so, I think we all have a sense of how limiting just talk therapy is, when you talk about experience as opposed to entering into it. And again I had the interpersonal, psychodynamic background, relational background. An additional aspect that Hakomi brought forward was the inter-psychic aspect that the person themselves can be in touch with their own experience. There's a deep, internal wisdom that you can invite people into. So that helped combine the interpersonal and the inter-psychic and made for a fuller therapy.

I think I've always been driven over the years, I'm still driven by what it means, what human transformation means and what that's about and how you can support it. I'm always kind of looking for the next piece. And so forth. So that's driven me to study pretty deeply and widely over the years because I'm always inspired and I'm always left with questions or dissatisfied about what we're not getting, what we're not doing, what we're missing.

S P: And one of the things that you have to pay a lot of attention to is mindfulness.

G J: Yeah, yeah and I think that's Ron's real brilliant contribution to the field, not just using mindfulness as an adjunct to therapy, which some people had good luck with, but actually using mindfulness as the main therapeutic tool within the session. So if you think of therapy in terms of the organization of experience, we all organize our experience, we all make sense of our experience, try to find meaningful ways to understand the world and ourselves in it. Once we make sense of the world that's not a therapy issue, but the trouble is a lot of us make sense of the world in such a way that we that we kind of organize out certain things. Like support or intimacy or authenticity or who knows what. Mindfulness really is the premiere tool for being able to study your experience as opposed to simply being at the mercy of it. *Watzlawick* and so forth, all those folks, they said consciousness is the problem. And so they developed hypnotic ways to get around it. But mindfulness actually allows you to study consciousness and take a step back and distance from it and notice what we do to create our world, to construct it. So getting that distance is a very powerful thing, and a very experiential thing because you can't do it without being highly attuned to present moment experience.

S P: Yeah. So mindfulness is one of these words that can be intimidating to some people, because maybe it can evoke the idea of being so in tune with the moment that its almost beyond normal. And

obviously that's not the way that you use it in a session. So do you want to talk a little bit more about what mindfulness is in the context of experiential therapy?

G J: Yeah. Well its probably helpful to, (excuse me, got a little frog in my throat,) to contrast it with ordinary consciousness, which carries us through most of the day. One of the characteristics of ordinary consciousness is that our awareness is kind of out there in the world attending to whatever we're doing, which means we are doing something, we have some plans of agenda, and most of what we do is automatic. We're not going to think about it, you don't have to think about shifting gears in the car if you are an experienced driver, and that's good. You wouldn't want to have to be aware of all of these things. Normally ordinary consciousness carries us through the day and is just fine. But again, if you in your life start to notice that, well that you're unhappy on some level, it could be that you're in an unhappy situation, externally. It could be that internally, you're organizing your life in such a way that it adds unnecessary suffering to the life we already have. So if you get a little suspicious or curious as to how you're organizing the world and you wonder why you can't enjoy going to a party when your friend can, your friend is having a good time and you kind of feel like you're starving in the midst of a banquet, you get curious about that. Mindfulness can be a very powerful tool to help you be curious. And I think curiosity is a good word, like mindful is kind of a technical, Buddhist word in one way, but the essence of it is helping, yeah helping yourself get curious about yourself, study yourself, take yourself under observation, which means slowing down and turning your awareness towards present moment experience, and kind of being in a more receptive mode where you kind of give up your agendas and trying to prove anything or do anything and just check in with what is.

S P: So I want to maybe just summarize a bit of what I'm hearing, something where its sparked by curiosity, not just taking for granted that what you do automatically is the only way to do things. A sense of looking, a little bit, as if from the outside at what's happening, reflecting on it.

G J: Yeah, yeah. Kind of saying "hi" to yourself. And again, sometimes it's a little hard to sort out. Like one time this one woman came to me who wanted to do a session and she says "I'm sad, because my boyfriend just left me." So I said, "Well that sounds appropriate, your boyfriend leaves you, and there's grief you feel sad, so doesn't exactly sound like a therapy issue. That's life." She says, "yeah, well yeah I know, but on the other hand this is the fourth time it has happened in a row and I go through this relationship and we go through certain things, and the guy ends up leaving and I end up sad, so it makes me curious about why do I end up in these semi abusive relationships all the time." So I said, "Oh, okay, alright. So there's a habit or a pattern here that it might be useful to get curious about." And so we did. We started into a therapeutic process, and started to mindfully check in more closely with her experience and what made her attracted to certain kind of guys and so forth.

The great thing about mindfulness is that if you become aware of some aspect of your creation, and with mindfulness part of the underlying theory is that life is a creative act, at least in part. We certainly are co-creators of our world, and so that means any sensation or feeling or memory or posture or anything is something we've created. And if we become mindful of it, its like you start following a thread that goes backward, or goes from surface structure more deeply into the core organizing beliefs that created that something we started with. So you go from the creation to the creator, and the creator is usually some belief about life and the world.

And again, it might be a problematic belief, like if you think, if you had the experience as a young person that you weren't supported, and it might have been totally true, in that situation growing up, but then your 40, 50, 60 years old and you still feel you're unsupported when the truth is there are people all around you who are willing to support you in certain ways. So, mindfulness helps access those core beliefs and helps you update the files and bring in the new; open yourself to a wider reality, a richer possibility for life.

Of course that's a scary thing. If you get close to, if you go down deep into an issue about support and you realize that you did have these core foundational experiences of not being supported, the possibility of allowing in support later on can really scare you because your unconscious says 'Oh wait a minute, last time we allowed ourselves to be supported we were deeply disappointed," and so working with barriers is a fundamental part of the work. Mindfulness helps you access those barriers and helps you get clear what they are and what they need.

S P: So, I mean we can come back later to the beliefs that you mentioned but I wanted to thank you for your description there of examining things, because it made a little bit more clear what you had said earlier about mindfulness being a state of being receptive and so what you've described, this process is not a process of forcing change but a process of being very open to seeing what comes up and to notice what comes up as a very important prerequisite to any change happening.

G J: Yeah, that's well said. So, we're talking about change without force, and we're also talking about lazy therapists, because if someone feels safe enough with you to turn their awareness inward, toward their felt present experience, and you think in terms of a living organic system, not a machine or something, they will go to where they need to go to discover what's going on within them, and again what they need. while the therapist is more following instead of directing or leading, like we do in most of our western oriented kind of therapies. Again, which is nice. People are discovering things for themselves in a mindful state of consciousness. You don't have to talk them into anything, or float any interpretation that you have to get into a defense about or argument about. The person names their own experience, as you help them be in touch with it.

S P: So maybe this would be a good time to talk a little bit more about what happens in a session, obviously no two sessions are alike, but if you want to make describe a specific situation to have a little bit more of a hands on sense of what it's like.

G J: Yeah, well to go back to what you said before, its absolutely true that no two people are alike. Its like fingerprints, there's no two people that think alike or move alike or have the same posture or walk alike. I was struck by that by going down to the YMCA like I used to do when I was in Chicago and watching how people work on one of those elliptical machines. Its almost the same mechanical routine everyone is doing, but everyone has such a distinct way of doing it. So one of the great things about therapy is that you absolutely never get bored because everyone is absolutely unique and so you never know what you are going to find. So that puts in a little plug for thinking of people as non linear systems, by the way, not machines.

But anyway someone comes in the door and they're usually, often, well most often they're disturbed by something, some anxiety or depression or whatever, or stress that they want to get at. And if they are going to look at their own part in it, in their life, in their situation, then the first part of a session would just be making enough contact and developing the therapeutic relationship to the point where they feel safe, because you can't ask them to go to the next step, asking someone

to be mindful unless they feel safe. Because if they have to keep one eye out on you, to wonder what you're up to or what your game is or what your deal is that you might be running on them, you know they really can't pay attention to their inner experience. So, that's common to a lot of therapies. Therapeutic relationship, establishing safety.

But then if that's there, then the next phase would be, and let's say they presented with some kind of sadness. The next stage in Hakomi would be not to simply talk about the sadness for very long, to tell stories on top of stories; the next phase would be what we call accessing, which is inviting mindfulness and teaching someone, and it takes more or less teaching depending on the person and what their background is. But, teaching them to become mindful by inviting them to study, to be curious about the sadness. And so there are many many ways of doing that. A simple way might be to say "Well, why don't we just slow down and notice where this sadness is in your body right now," and if they are able and willing to do that, then all of a sudden they're not talking about a sad story but they're bringing their awareness to bear on the sadness, and maybe they notice something in their chest, and if they stay with it, maybe they notice a little flushing or something around their cheeks, neck, kind of like Focusing. They might discover like "Oh, sadness isn't quite the right word here, it's more of a quality of grief." So you end up with that felf sense of rightness. Oh yeah, grief is a better word, there's a felt-sense resonance more than the word sadness, and of course this gets us into the issue of how words can be the birth or death of the being.

S P: So I want to just take a brief moment here to say, again in a very very beautiful way you're describing what you're doing to help people come into mindfulness is a combination of slowing them down, and then, slowing them down and drawing their attention to the inner experience and specifically the body, so that without even having to say don't stay in core you're actually bringing them to focus on the actual experience and seeing it unfold moment by moment.

G J: Exactly. You haven't even used the word mindfulness or given any chalk talk or anything, but yeah, just invited them into -- again you have to do more or less with the person depending on who they are -- but, yeah, just invite them into the immediacy of their experience. And then, again you have an underlying faith or trust that there is an organic wisdom at work here that wants to move things towards a greater wholeness or complexity and so forth. *Diana Fosha, Gendlin and* a number of people talk about it. There is an impulse to heal.

S P: Yes, and you're also describing that the attitude of yourself of the therapist is to not be so hung up on the words but to see the words as something that also unfolds, because its not that the words are very specific, but it's a process of the interaction of the client with the words and their state of mindfulness. And then little by little things get more in focus.

G J: Yeah, that's right. So we talk a lot about the mind body interface in Hakomi or going back and forth between words which express meaning, which of course is very important, and direct experience. So we're always going back and forth, we're always listening. Do the words really have a live quality to them that express meaning or are they getting a little too much distance, a little too abstract. And if that's the case, we invite people back more into the body, the experience, because we want the words to come out of experience. We don't want to impose the words on the experience. So words are necessary but its tricky. Yeah, I'm always going back and forth between bodily experience and words that give meaning.

You do that first stage of accessing, inviting mindfulness, and then the next stage is what we call deepening or just trying to maintain the mindfulness. The problem, with most people if you ask them a question, like "where is it in your body?"is that they'll go inside and get the answer, like" I have this sense in my chest," and then they'll pop out into inter- personal consciousness to tell you the answer. So the next stage at Hakomi is to try to maintain the mindfulness, by teaching someone, by saying to them' "I'd like you to report on your experience, but see if you can name it without leaving it. You don't have to come out of it to tell me about it." And so they say, "I sense this thing in my chest," and a deepening kind of response might be to say, "Yeah, so what's the quality of that sense, is it like a buzzing or a prickling or this or that?" The question doesn't matter, the function of the question matters; that it just keeps them in their experience longer and more deeply. And so they again say, "You know, it has the quality of grief." And so then you might say, well, you wouldn't say it but you'd do it, you want to go from the general to the specific, like, "Oh grief, grief like you lost something, or grief like you didn't get something, or . . .?" And again, you just float this little list, this laundry list and then you let it flow, and the effect is that they have to check with their experience to see whether one of your possibilities is right and resonates, or whether there is some other possibility that comes out of them that's right for the grief. And so maybe they sense something like, "Yeah it's like I lost something somehow." So again, now we're deepening, and if we stay mindful of that, like, "Okay, so there's a sense of lostness, let's hang out with this lostness, what's that like? What's your experience with that?" And if you stay with it, it will often deepen into maybe a core memory that underlies the grief, the sense of lostness.

S P: So through this process, the role of the therapist is to help the client stay inside the experience, not to come out of it in order to report it and by doing that, you deepen the experience, and eventually have the possibility of reaching some more core beliefs.

G J: Yeah exactly, exactly. Yeah and once you get to a core belief, then that's a creative place, where again the possibility arises of reorganizing around a more expanded belief and what makes it a core belief in this case we're talking about is they were in a relationship, maybe someone was lost, like a parent died or something or a friend went away and it hurt them deeply, and so now they're afraid to enter deeply into relationships because they have this core memory of when you enter into a relationship, you might be setting yourself up for deep grief and loss and hurt.

And so then, what we often do -- this is one of the things Kurtz invented that I think is very brilliant -- you often say that when you get a sense of what someone's core belief is, you'll often introduce to them, as a mindful experiment in awareness, you often introduce to them the exact opposite belief of how they're organized. When you do that, if you're right, if you're getting the belief right, and you come up with the opposite, then again, you're pretty much assured that you're going to come up with the barriers to taking in a new more expanded belief and what's going on with that. So in this case you might set up an experiment in awareness where you ask them to mindfully study themselves and what happens when you say to them that "It's okay to enter deeply into new relationships." And then the part of them that's not okay with it will usually pop up, and say like, "Oh no, don't do that, or you can't do that because it might be lost and you'll be devastated." So again, it evokes the core.

And by the way, that can be a misunderstanding of Hakomi. When someone sees that we say something to someone, it's usually in a positive form like, "It's okay to take in support" or "You're okay the way you are." We're not doing affirmations. We're not trying to talk someone into something. We're trying to . . . if I say to you that you're a good person, and you kind of have a

warm feeling in relation to that, that pretty much tells us that you've had no issue with that. You know you are a good person. But if you think that's an issue for you, and we say "You're a good person," again, we're not trying to talk you into anything. We're trying to evoke a part of you that doesn't believe that.

S P: Yeah. And its happening at a stage where you're very mindful at this stage of the process. So the process you've been describing is one of deepening the sense of resonance, of the client being able to listen to words and check the words versus his internal system or her internal system. So by the time you go with that statement, that core statement, they're in a mode of being able to say this is me or this is not me.

G J: Yeah, absolutely right. And so it all depends on mindfulness, like if you say something like "You're a good person" to someone in an ordinary consciousness, it doesn't go anywhere it doesn't have much of an effect outside of normal social discourse. All of these things depend on that experiential state of mindful awareness of the present moment, just like you said.

And so, is it okay if I add in another piece here? Part of how this all fits into me, in terms of my background in theology as well as therapy and all that is what I'm really at base, I think I'm a sweet, gentle imperialist trying to take over the world. And Hakomi is one of my tools. What I'd like to do is take over the world in the service of compassion. It's like the Dali Lama says, that's the next stage for evolution, for culture, for the world in general, we need to learn to be more compassionate. And in the Christian heritage, my heritage, compassion is no small thing to talk about. In the Christian scriptures, the only person that's said to be compassionate at all, in all the Christian scriptures, is Jesus himself. So he's compassionate and the reason that's such a big deal is that the translation of compassion in Greek is being" moved in the guts."

So it's important for me in the overall scheme of things that we do things that raise consciousness, which means enhance our ability to be compassionate. And so when you can help someone in this therapeutic way to be compassionate with their inner world, whatever parts of them are disturbing -- maybe they're not so compassionate with whatever is bothering them, their sadness, their anger, their rage, jealousy -- if you can help them get to the point of being in compassionate awareness to that and do some healing, there's a ripple that goes out for that, and hopefully you build on that so that a better ability to be compassionate with yourself becomes a better ability to be compassionate with others, and perhaps it enhances the awareness of how culture and social structures have impacted our abilities to be compassionate. And we keep growing in compassion so that you have compassion for yourself, for your family, for your loved ones, and then going beyond that to your tribe. If it ends with the tribe, if that's as far as our compassion goes, then we end up with the tribal warfare we have in the world today. So it is necessary to go beyond your tribe to the larger community of tribes and nation, and beyond that to all the beings in the world. There's an overall thrust of doing whatever we can to move things forward, expanded compassion so that when something happens to someone else in some other part of the world, it's not just them over there, it's really us. And, if we sense that, which *Ken Wilber* talks about a lot, if we sense that they are us, then we're actually moved to do physical action in the world to remedy these things. So it's all part of a larger scheme.

S P: Yeah, so that in a way, as you are doing therapy, it's not something that is, in a way limited to therapy, but it has a connection with something larger both in a spiritual sense but also in a very practical sense, including the world.

G J: Yeah, right. And that's why I've really stayed with Hakomi all these years, not so much just for the technique, but because of the principles.

🕮 *This conversation was transcribed by Michael Klein.*

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