Aline LaPierre

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Aline LaPierre, PSYD, MFT, is the coauthor of *Healing Developmental Trauma: How Early Trauma Affects Self-Regulation, Self-Image, and the Capacity for Relationship*, and she has published numerous articles in peer-reviewed somatic journals. She was on the faculty of the somatic doctoral program at Santa Barbara Graduate Institute for 10 years. A graduate of Pacifica Graduate Institute, she also trained as a psychoanalyst at the New Center for Psychoanalysis in Los Angeles. She is the creator of *NeuroAffective Touch*™ and *Experiential Psychobiology*™ workshops supporting the development of embodied awareness for psychotherapists and bodyworkers. In private practice in West Los Angeles, she specializes in the integration of relational psychodynamic and somatic approaches.

Serge Prengel, LMHC is the editor the *Proactive Mindfulness* project.

For better or worse, this transcript retains the spontaneous, spoken-language quality of the podcast conversation.

Serge Prengel: Hi Aline.

Aline LaPierre: Well, hi Serge.

Serge: So how did you get into somatic work?

Aline: Well, it was a long journey and I would say that it was an evolution because I started out as a painter. As I was painting, I could see on the canvas certain patterns, certain distortions that were bizarre, and they were bizarre enough to attract my attention. And then I met a friend who was also a painter who would look at her paintings in a mirror so that she could see them in reverse to…to really understand what she was doing in terms of the energetic patterning. And when I did that with my paintings, I was shocked. Everything was leaning from left to right, and when I looked at them directly, they seemed kind of normal but a little strange. That's when I got that whatever I was putting on the canvas was a reflection of what was patterned in my body and my nervous system. And of course, being somewhat of a…I don't know, a proud artist, I didn't want to show my deficiencies to the world and I thought, "I have to do something about my body because I can't let this be public."

Serge: So in a way, from the very beginning, you were doing sort of art therapy on yourself by using art as a mindful exploration of who you are.

Aline: Yes, well said. That's right. And art actually is a mindful exploration—because painting is so slow, and it does require such a mindful attention to gesture, there was already there a patterning in using the body. I think musicians do it even more; art really comes through the body. So… at that point, I was living in Los Angeles and I heard about Continuum, which was Emilie Conrad's work. I heard the word "continuum" and a little bell went off in my brain and I immediately found myself at

Continuum and found myself discovering ways of being with the body that were so far beyond any consciousness I'd ever had before. I would say that Continuum was really the doorway into my understanding and my living in my body.

Serge: Mhm, mhm. Yeah. So from that curiosity to the body you actually discovered that there was something very satisfying about exploring in your body and living in your body.

Aline: Right, yes. What Emilie taught was really the intelligence of the tissues. She had somehow come to this incredible wisdom that there's an evolutionary intelligence and that if we enter our body with curiosity and without judgment, we will come into contact with that intelligence. And if we allow this intelligence to move us, it has a profound healing power. And beyond a healing power, it has an evolutionary movement in that it develops us in ways that we weren't before. So it was a way, a developmental way, of experiencing an evolutionary perspective and from the perspective of the body itself of going beyond the personal story.

Serge: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So finding that implicit energy in the body and getting out of its way so you could follow it as opposed to being blocked by the story and the older narrative.

Aline: Yes. I wasn't a psychologist then. At a certain point, I went back to school and got a degree and a license to be a psychologist—but at that point, I was just an artist discovering this.

Serge: Mhm.

Aline: When I came to psychology and when I came to therapy, I already had this established relationship with my body.

Serge: Yeah, yeah.

Aline: Because I was a painter, I was also doing highly symbolic work and I was curious about what the imagery meant. At the time, Pacifica Graduate Institute was just starting, and I saw an ad for it. I thought, "Maybe that would be a fun place to go to explore what this imagery is about." Particularly that Pacifica was a Jungian school and they were inviting artists of all kinds to join the program. They did accept me in the program and I began the journey of exploring the psyche alongside this other exploration that had been going on with my body.

Serge: Mhm, mhm.

Aline: When it came to having to do an internship in a regular talk therapy clinic, I was suddenly struck with the fact that I couldn't sit and just talk with a person because I could already see and feel so much of what was going on in the body. That's when I made the connection with somatic psychotherapy, which was still—this was the eighties, early nineties—not that common.

Serge: Yeah, yeah. So, in a way, it was the meeting point of these two areas of your own quest.

Aline: Right.

Serge: And realizing that the quest for meaning was not to be separated from understanding yourself or understanding people at a somatic level.

Aline: Right. Yes. That has remained very important to me. I didn't know what to do; how does one bring the somatic and the psyche together given that there was such a taboo around the body in the psychological circles where I was trying to learn to be a therapist. And that's when I discovered—in addition to Continuum, the only thing I found was available: Rolfing and postural integration. And that was my entry to bringing mind and body together in a therapeutic setting, and from there kind of continue to evolve…

Serge: Yeah. So then you started to integrate it in your own practice.

Aline: I started to integrate mind and body in my own practice. And I soon came up against—I suppose a kind of a glass ceiling that, as a body-centered therapist or somatic therapist, there was a tremendous amount of prejudice. I would go to Marriage and Family Therapist meetings and I would tell them, "I work with the body, I touch the body," and I might as well have told them I was a witch. It was very disconcerting at the time to meet that…I don't know, that lack of knowledge, really. And so, I decided that I didn't want to be marginalized as a body psychotherapist and I enrolled to train as a psychoanalyst. I thought that if I had the credentials of a psychoanalyst and I touched my patients, maybe that would give me some credibility.

Serge: But, you know, it's interesting—as a side to directly your experience—in a way what you're touching on, is how the support we get from society—the sense of being marginal, the sense of being supported, and it's not just at an individual level but in a way it kind of translates into how we contact clients that—do we feel that we are supported by the mainstream or oddball—is going to have an impact also in terms of the therapeutic relationship.

Aline: It certainly does, and it has an impact also on who comes to work with us.

Serge: Mhm, mhm.

Aline: Yes, it's true. It has been a long struggle for me. Today, all these years later, I'm in contact with a lot of young women, young women and men, who are starting on their journey of becoming therapists, and look at me saying: "How did you integrate?" Because it seems like that issue is still a pertinent one to these times even though there are more trainings in somatic work. I still see a lot of bodyworkers or massage therapists who ask me: "How do I learn the psychological part?" and a lot of psychologists who have'nt learned or don't know how to include the body yet see the importance of it.

Serge: Mhm, mhm.

Aline: Because they each have gone through a fairly stringent training to become who they are, they're not ready to take on a whole other training that's long and expensive; as psychotherapists, where are they going to go back to school to really learn about the body? There are trainings—such as Somatic Experiencing, Pat Ogden's training or Hakomi—that are wonderful trainings, but what I see, at least happening in Los Angeles, is that psychotherapists are doing these trainings and take it back in their clinical practice but they haven't had the deepening within their own bodies.

Serge: Yeah.

Aline: These weekend trainings can't offer that piece of truly exploring—I guess I'm going back to my experience of many years at Continuum—the intelligence of the body. And that piece I'm kind of passionate about—I see it is missing and I'm really questioning how it can be brought forth.

Serge: So that feels great, so in a way, making a big difference between training techniques, philosophy, approach, that whole kind of thought, but also the direct experience of being with the intelligence of the body, and experiencing what it's like to be with the intelligence of the body.

Aline: Yes.

Serge: So maybe, understanding that one can only have that experience when one has it, and talking about it has very real limitations—as if we were talking about what it's like to ride a bicycle—but can we give a little bit of a taste of what it's like to be with the experience of the body versus not being with it?

Aline: Yes, let's see…I'm trying to get the thread of an example that would be concise and really to the point. Well—maybe this is going to be a roundabout answer—but one of the things that I track, or that I really pay attention to in the body, is the sense of expansion and contraction. The breath is an obvious example: we inhale, there's a certain expansion, we exhale, there's a certain contraction. It can be just a regular pulse where we inhale and exhale as part of a natural cycle—a pulse cycle—or it can be full of fear… an underlying contraction that restricts the inhalation and the exhale. So when I'm with a client, very early on, I educate them about that sense of expansion and contraction. To explain the contraction, it's easy to say, "If someone says something hurtful to you, what happens in your body?" And right away, the person will make a gesture, for example their fist over their heart, and say, "Oh, it's like a shock in my heart."

Serge: Mhm.

Aline: The bodily reaction often gets covered up by a narrative about something that was hurtful. But the intelligence of the body, or the body's story, is always underneath letting a person know that something has happened that is disconnecting or hurtful or harmful. The body is the first to have a reaction that tells us. There will be a contraction in the gut, or a little shock in the heart, or a closure at the throat, and that's the body telling us, even before any other layer, that something has happened that breaks the connection with the person we are relating to. I guess I'm talking right now about relational intelligence, and the visceral knowing about relational intelligence.

Serge: Yeah, yeah. So…you know, in what you said, there's so many different strands. And so what I want to do is I want to try for a moment to, in a way, separate them and—not to say that I remember all of them at this point, but I see one where you're talking about breathing and contraction-expansion, you're talking about tracking, you're talking about education—just so that, in a way, for clients to speak that language, they have to know the possibility of that language and the showing. So…maybe also, simply in the middle one that I mentioned, there's the tracking, and the tracking is something that cannot be done mechanically and has to be with the therapist's own experience of that. So maybe—how can we just develop parts of this to go…is that…is what's difficult self-tracking for people? Is it…

Aline: If the therapist is not present in their own body, they will have difficulty empathically sensing what is happening in their client's. And clients…I mean, when do we ever learn to track in our

bodies? You know, for a lot of therapists I see, Somatic Experiencing offered a real opening because it brought forth the idea of tracking in the body. And it's one thing to track sensation in a general way, but then, the more we know about the anatomy of the body, the more we know the systems of the body and what they do, the more interesting the tracking becomes because it can become more specific. Is what is happening in the digestive system, or is it in the nervous system, is it more a cellular feeling, or a sense in the bones—all of the tissues have their own intelligence because they do different jobs.

Serge: Mhm, mhm.

Aline: I'm talking about refining tracking.

Serge: Yeah, yeah. So it feels very nice, both in the phrase you use, you say, "refining tracking," but also as you were listing different possibilities—is it the digestive system, is this this, is this that—so in a way not just staying at the surface but living there in an educated way so that there is that possibility of asking questions to oneself and of literally refining.

Aline: Refining. You know, what I see happening a lot as well is that there is a fascination with the nervous system. And lots of talk about, "We're tracking the nervous system, we're tracking the sympathetic, the parasympathetic." But the nervous system is the communication system for the body and the nervous system is actually *carrying* signals from the organs, from the cells, from different other areas of the body.

Serge: Mhm, mhm. So that's kind of an opening to the richness of it and, in a sense…in a way, since tracking is something that comes from the metaphor of hunting, if you take a city person, you put it in the forest, there's a lot of stuff that they're totally oblivious to, that they're not seeing, that actually an experienced tracker, hunter, would see.

Aline: That's wonderful, that's a great image. You know, I'm in the process of learning to put a narrative to this experience or to what I'm trying to communicate, so it's really helpful to have you say it in your own words that way.

Serge: Thank you.

Aline: Yeah.

Serge: So…then that's really…the part is…what you're saying is that if you're not exploring the territory in that way and broadening your experience of it, you're going to just miss out on a lot.

Aline: Yes, yes. That's very wonderful, when you think about it; we live in these bodies that have been evolving for millions of years, and there's—there's so much—I love your metaphor of the jungle and that an experienced tracker will see so much more. With experience, the life of the jungle comes forth, you know? Whereas when one isn't experienced, you miss so much, you don't get to participate in life in the same way. It's very surface.

Serge: Yeah. So then that's a very strong case for…it's not just armed with a theory or armed with a sense of "Yeah, I'm going to track," but that in a way, logging in and…experiencing tensionality and tension and learning about the ——?

Aline: Yeah. The way I teach is that I start with looking at images of the anatomy and really looking at the design and going deep into the function of the design itself on a biological level, and then moving back out to the more energetic experience that comes from that.

Serge: So is there an example that comes to mind that might make it concrete? Between the anatomy and the expression.

Aline: Well—the heart, for example. There is within the heart, a pulse—the SA node—there is a cluster of cells in the heart that initiate, that *ignite* the pulse. That's where life starts. And so, for example, we'll look at an animation of the heart pulsing, but also an animation that shows the ignition at the SA node and the way that signal travels through the heart and creates the pulse. So then, having that image in one's mind of what actually is happening, and then going to a more energetic felt-sense experience of the heart, one can go deeper into feeling that moment of the ignition. It's very powerful. Especially that the heart absorbs so many shocks in terms of missed attunements or abuse or whatever; to reconnect with the source of the pulse in the heart is very healing and powerful.

Serge: Mhm, mhm. So…what you're describing is that sense of connecting with the mechanism and not…it's not an abstract concept because the very specific way you're describing it is something where there is a way of making come together the inner experience of the movement together with the road map, which is that animated movie, that conceptual framework, that shows what is happening. And as the two overlap, then there is an in-depth understanding that combines the experience but also it's meaning or it's…in a larger framework.

Aline: Every single organ and part of the body has—I don't know…I personally find it fascinating to approach my body in that way because I feel that it's honoring of something greater than me in terms of that evolutionary intelligence which I get to be witness of.

Serge: Mhm, mhm. So in addition to just that understanding of how the…the organ, the body, works in that sense, we're in an even larger framework of feeling the sense of having the experience as a human being on part of that pulse of life.

Aline: Right. Bringing that very much into a relational context now—we're so geared to be relational and to take in our environment in addition to feeling what's inside of us. The relational piece is powerful in terms of understanding the body. The eyes are very relational, how we listen is very relational. When we are traumatized, we shut down some aspect of the body that shuts down our relationality, but by going back to the anatomy, we can go to a place that's deeper than the story and then come to the story with the sense of owning ourselves.

Serge: Yeah, yeah. So…so that part about…when we track the body, when we pay attention to what's happening inside, it's not a means to an end, it's not just like, "Oh, I'm feeling a sensation here or there," but actually with a deeper understanding that everything in us is connected to our environment in a broad sense. So in other words, when we track in that perspective, we actually are deeply engaged in having a cellular or muscular understanding of our relationship with the outside.

Aline: Yeah. Mhm. Yes. It all works together.

Serge: Yeah. Yeah. So, as we're talking this way, I am experiencing a sense of…like a little bit of slowing down and, for lack of a better word, I would say a sense of awe…in the sense of, you know, like feeling it in the eyes and feeling it in other places, but the sense of it is at the same time feeling the connection with that something larger.

Aline: Oh, that's wonderful. Because that's what I was trying to communicate. So it's wonderful to hear you reflect it back, given how, sometimes, I find it difficult to communicate it with words.

Serge: Mhm.

Aline: Yes, yes. And…yes!

Serge: So maybe just taking a moment to see…we started off with the idea of communicating your experience of how you got into this somatic approach, and then went into the sense of…on your experience of dealing with other people who are learning somatic approaches and what that might be missing, and we talked a little bit about that experience, so just see if there's something else that might need to be said to conclude this.

Aline: I think I would just say that from that perspective, it seems to me that going to the body is a highly spiritual experience.

Serge: Mhm.

Aline: As you said, a really awesome experience.

Serge: Yeah, yeah. And it feels nice that—as you say it—it's within the context of having described a mechanism, steps and approach, the spirit in how it can be done, as opposed to it's a statement. And then there is no pathway to doing it.

Aline: Right, yes.

Serge: So it's an experience, but also one that one can find its way to.

Aline: Yes. Absolutely. Thank you, Serge.

Serge: Thank you.

This conversation was transcribed by Helen Hu.

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