Greg Madison

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Greg Madison, PhD, is an existential psychologist and psychotherapist active in various academic and professional communities across Europe and internationally. He has written the books, The End of Belonging and Existential Migration and co-edited three books on Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy and Existential Therapy. He continues to write articles on contemporary topics related to experiential-existential psychotherapy, participatory democracy, psychology and society. He founded The London Focusing Institute and is co-editor of Existential Analysis.

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: So Greg, you're a Focusing-oriented therapist.

Greg Madison: Yes. I would describe my understanding of therapy in different ways. One of which would be Focusing oriented. Usually I describe it the opposite of whoever I'm talking to, so if I'm talking to a Focusing therapist I probably wouldn't describe it that way, I would probably describe it as existential. If I'm talking to existential therapists I would describe it as Focusing oriented. I'm not sure why I do that, I think I like to take the least popular stance.

Serge: There's also, in addition to the fun of doing that, maybe in a sense a Focusing oriented therapist already knows or has a sense of what Focusing oriented therapy is and so you need to talk about the other side and vice versa.

Greg: Yeah, it is that, it's refining a little bit what I mean by it. If I say I'm just Focusing oriented to a bunch of Focusing oriented therapists they may assume they know what I mean. When I work in a Focusing oriented way I think I have a somewhat different emphasis from some Focusing oriented therapists, and that's what I want to emphasize. That's where the existential comes in.

Serge: Maybe before we go too much into this, a point that it's not just in jest in a way to not want to take words for granted. Because in lots of ways this is what Focusing is all about. Not to get pigeonholed into… things have a precise meaning but actually an invitation to explore.

Greg: Absolutely. That's fundamental not only to therapy but to how we understand therapy, how we understand life. I always want to return things to an open unknownness. So whenever anything starts to feel a little bit too conceptual, a little bit too wrapped up, a little too much like we're all agreeing on something. I really want to open that up again, and I try to watch myself and try to take unpopular stances in my own understanding, and challenge myself as much as other people. But absolutely, I want all of the… especially in therapy… in this day and age it seems like things are getting much more conceptual, much more technical as well. Not that all of that is useless by any

means, but it worries me, and when I come across that in myself or in others, I want to challenge it and get us right back down to the experiential, because I think at that level no concept or any understanding is fixed. It very quickly moves, very quickly shifts to a little bit more than we said a minute ago.

Serge: Yeah, yeah. So I want to highlight that part, the distrust of what is conceptual, what is fixed, and going to that space of open unknownness. Which essentially is a way to describe experience and its capacity to shift moment by moment.

Greg: Yeah, absolutely. I think some people are concerned. I think, perhaps, some people that don't work more directly with the body and don't work more directly with experience as it shifts and changes in the body. I think some of those people are worried that if we don't have some structure of the concepts or the understanding of approaches or models, then we'll have nothing.

Serge: Mhmm.

Greg: That just a big gap opens, and then it's a free for all. But I know that isn't true, and certainly my own understanding of what the body is, and what therapy is, and what life is has shifted a lot by kind of returning over and over again to that openness. My ideas have really had to change.

Serge: Yeah, so in a way instead of hanging on to a need for structures, the focus on the body and on experience actually puts us into a mode where the structure is the expectation of the constant shifting.

Greg: Exactly. And that expectation isn't always met. Sometimes, for me at least, I go into the body, I find an experience, and it's stuck. My expectation is that by being with it, it will shift and change, and sometimes that doesn't happen. So then I start wondering what I'm doing wrong, as though this thing 'stuck' isn't actually the information I need.

Serge: Mhmm.

Greg: So I really… in the most subtle ways I really notice how often I bring to my experience assumptions and preconceptions that really get in the way.

Serge: Mhmm. And so as you're describing this, it is obviously something that happens at a personal level and happens at the level of the therapist, and so there's this attitude of the noticing. Of the noticing what you notice, of the assumptions, and how this whole process is correcting what is actually happening in the process.

Greg: Exactly. I agree with you, I would call it a corrective process. There's times that I would say things that are very unusual, even to me. Things like "the body isn't very interested in my point of view." Sometimes it's like, "It's almost as though the body just wants its vehicle back, it wants me to get in the back seat for a while." It's a strange experience when, experientially, you can feel the body pushing in a particular direction. It very much has its very own point of view, and it's often not my point of view, and it doesn't seem to care about that. If I follow it long enough and can open up to where it's taking me even though it might seem in a direction I hadn't expected, often I realize it's more deeply my point of view than my point of view was originally. It's almost more deeply me than the me that was in the way of it unfolding.

Serge: So I want to just push a little bit in the area… when you say "follow the body." Because people who are body psychotherapists tend to follow the body, and each with different ways of following the body. So, talk a little bit more about how you follow the body.

Greg: Yeah, that's a good point. That part of my practice and my understanding of the world is based very much on Gendlin's work, of course. I would follow the body by taking everything that seems to come from the body back to the body to check it to see if there's an experiential response, if there's a feeling in the middle of the body, usually in the middle of the body, that seems to confirm what we've just thought together, the client and I. So it's that back and forth checking constantly with the body and the experience in the body. It's not, for me… although I see the value of this, it's not manipulating the body. It's not "Well, what happens if you uncross your arms," or "I notice that you're tapping your foot." I'm much less likely to pay explicit attention to the physical body the way it's manifesting. I'm much more likely to want to pay attention to what might be called the experiential body, or the larger body, or the energy body. I don't make any of those terms, but it's that form of body that I'm more guided by.

Serge: So let's stay a little bit more with, for argument's sake, let's call it the experiential body. And talk about how it might play out in a session as you're talking about connecting, checking if the ideas that have been mentioned are related to an experience in the experiential body.

Greg: Yeah. The first thing I would say about that is it requires me to be in contact with the experiencing in my body. My feeling in my chest and my stomach, usually. The middle part of my body is what guides the session from my point of view. It's not theory, it's not remembering what had happened in the session before, it is very much my moment to moment experience with a client. So, it is as though my body gathers up what the client is saying or experiencing and I'm trying to make sense of it experientially inside of myself, and then I make a space to say that back to the client to see if that resonates or not.

Serge: So that sense of, in a way, there's still a making sense of it, the difference is that instead of making sense of it in terms of logic, in terms of how it fits with theory, it's an experiential resonance, and experiential way in which your body absorbs that information.

Greg: Yes.

Serge: And understanding that when you absorb it, it's your own absorbing, it's not necessarily an objective reality, so you're checking with the client with this back and forth process.

Greg: It's not clear to me, to be honest, if it's my own absorbing. It's just not clear to me. There are times, usually but not always… usually I can feel in my body when I haven't said it back correctly. If the client just accepts it I'm not very convinced by that. If I don't feel the release inside of my own body, then I'm unconvinced that I really got it. There's even times when I have said something back to a client and the client has accepted it and I can feel in my own body… a certain degree of resonance, but I felt that there was a little bit still that I hadn't been able to say, and if I wait and put that into words as well, my body then releases, it feels like it opens up again. Often I've pushed for that, because often it's important for the client as well. So it's not clear to me if it is accurate to talk about the client's body and my body.

Serge: So there is a sense of maybe there is a field out there that you and the client are part of, and they're sensing into that field?

Greg: That is one way of saying it. I don't have another way saying it, and yet I notice in myself not wanting to agree with that. But it's not because I have a better way, it's more like I just don't want to have it pinned down at all.

Serge: Yeah, yeah. So, very consistent with what we were talking about before, that in a way every time we start to want to pin something down we're actually impoverishing it.

Greg: That's what I feel. The best I can do usually is say "it's as though." If I make it into a metaphor, I'm a little bit more comfortable with it. But yeah, it is as though there's… I don't know about the word 'field,' but there's an experiencing which includes us, the client and I. We're a part of it, somehow. It's almost as if it lives itself through us while we're together in a session, and we kind of pick up on it together in some way. That doesn't mean there aren't times that I have another point of view from the client, because that happens as well.

Serge: Yeah, but so that sense, in a way, is very consistent with the idea of therapy being an intersubjective, interactive field, where you have two people and something happens, and so in a way this is something related to there being something happening when somebody is actually listening in a very active way and in a very embodied way to the client's experience.

Greg: Yes, absolutely. It's like my description of the client's experience can carry it forward in the client's body as much as their own description of the experience. It doesn't matter so much who says it.

Serge: Mhmm, yeah. So your own description of the client's experience is maybe the trained person's way of sensing what's there that might at times be helping the client where they're not necessarily sensing it.

Greg: Yes. That's right, and in that sense I would say that the work is very phenomenological, because I'm not trying to make something happen, I'm just noticing when something is happening and isn't being paid attention to.

Serge: Mhmm. So, very important distinction. Not trying to make something happen, but noticing what happens.

Greg: Yes, exactly.

Serge: And you pointed out before how you are in touch with your own sense so that even if you said something that the client resonates with but it doesn't quite feel right, this is a totally okay part of the process to follow.

Greg: Yes. I can be quite transparent, and I can say to the client well it doesn't feel convincing to me. Or, I can say something, and if the client wants to pick it up as their own and I'm unconvinced by it, I can just sort of say well I just think that was my idea and sometimes get it out of the way quite easily. Sometimes it becomes a bigger deal than that. But the thing that's important from my point of view in this discussion is I've begun to wonder how much we individualize the things that we

experience that may not be individual at all. How much of what we actually experience and how much of what we see in the consulting room is not individual distress, or individual pathology, or whatever you want to call it, but actually is the living of a social and political time in the world. That people are coming in as individuals with problems that actually originate in, you might say, 'the field,' or in the social arena. And in that respect, I more and more am beginning to think of therapy as quite a political act.

Serge: Mhmm. So a sense that all of us, in a way, are not independent from the environment we live in, and if say I'm coming from a smoke-filled room, I'm going to smell like smoke whether I'm smoking or not, and if you were treating me based on the smoke without realizing that I'm just coming from a smoke-filled room, you would actually be ignoring the largest thing that has to do with that smell.

Greg: Exactly. and even worse, if I was trying to help you adapt to that smoke-filled room rather than saying, you know, maybe that room shouldn't be full of smoke. Maybe the problem is the room, the atmosphere there.

Serge: Yeah.

Greg: And I think that that's really important as an experiential existential therapist. I'm more and more interested in and concerned about the wider world, the world outside of the consulting room, and not making so much of a distinction between those two worlds. The world of the two of us in some comfortable office and the larger world, and wanting to make that link more explicitly, and wanting to move outside of the consulting room and bring some more of what we know about the body and about experiential listening into groups who are trying to have an impact in society.

Serge: So there's a fine line between adapting to the world in the sense of finding a way to enjoy the smoke-filled room, but also make room for sometimes what cannot be changed. But it's walking that fine line with the understanding that the problem is not the client's pathology necessarily, or not looking at it from that angle, but looking at it as how to adapt to an environment.

Greg: Yes.

Serge: Or how to dance with it or what to do with it, not necessarily adapt, but how to act.

Greg: Yeah, exactly. How to act, and it can be all sorts of acting even in hopeless situations. It might be possible to be defiant without being resentful and to not accept a situation even though there is no alternative, at least seemingly-so at the moment. It doesn't mean you have to accept it.

Serge: Yeah. We're talking about phenomenology, but also talking about existentialism, that sense of 'Here I am and where do I go?' Right, left, back, sideways. Moment by moment it's that question. It's not just experience by itself, it's experience together with what do I do next.

Greg: Exactly. And the other thing that that makes me think of is how much we try to act on our own and, perhaps, more than we do even as therapists. That maybe we should be encouraging our clients in this direction. Is to find a 'we.' To find others in the world with whom there is a kind of resonance, with whom there can be an authentic relationship, and together see what we can do, because I think as soon as you have even a group of three people together there's new possibilities

and new potential more so than if you're trying to do it on your own. You have your therapy session and then you go out into the world and you're on your own. I think we need to move away from that model. Therapy, unfortunately I think, reinforces that model.

Serge: Yeah, so maybe in a practical way it's a sense of 'Okay, so you found it helpful to be with me, it's been nice for you to see two brains are better than one, let's try what happens if you have three.'

Greg: Yeah, and again I have to say I'm not sure it's three brains!

Serge: Right, right!

Greg: I'm just not sure.

Serge: Right, three embodied..

Greg: Yeah, three manifestations of 'braining together.' I'm not making any claims, I only want to loosen the claims we make.

Serge: No, I'm following you, I'm just enjoying the interaction that way. I think part of it is it's a reminder of the limitations of our language and the phrases we use.

Greg: Yes.

Serge: We feel, time and again, drawn into the old cliche of mind, body, brain… what we're actually talking about is something different and we don't have the vocabulary for it.

Greg: Yeah, I absolutely agree with you. And also we get drawn back into the traditional ways of being together. Certainly with my clients I can feel that all the time, being pulled back into some kind of a therapist role, or the client being pulled back into some kind of role in the story they're telling about something that's happened in their lives. You get a meeting of three or four people together who want to change the world in some positive way, and how quickly even though they might be radical thinkers, their way of being together gets pulled back into old patterns of structuring in a meeting. I really would like us to be, to really hone our awareness of how easy it is to get pulled back into convention, and I really think that in this day and age not only in therapy but definitely in therapy, but also in the wider world because we're being challenged, the world is changing in some way we don't understand and I think we do really need to call upon that heightened awareness the body has or that the body is, I guess is a better way to say it. To be able to call upon that and to bring it into our ways of organizing, our ways of being together in therapy and our ways of organizing outside of therapy, to continually fall back onto the body and say, "Hold on a minute, let's just pause for a second here, what are we doing?" We're creating a subcommittee, do we really need to do that? Or is that just what we habitually do at this point when we tackle an issue? And to question everything we're doing… I would like us to come up with something more creative, and something new and innovative. I think we're being challenged to do that, and if we don't bring the body into it and the humanity of the body into it, I think that that space is going to be filled by technology alone, and that may not be the best solution.

Serge: So you're talking about both something that is a general comment about us human beings and our lives, and also what happens in therapy.

Greg: Absolutely.

Serge: And in terms of therapy what I'm hearing you saying is you're not about to say, "Here are the three steps," or the five steps, to make sure that you're doing it right, but you were talking about just taking a moment, that intentionality of taking a moment as 'wait a minute what is happening here?' So the intentionality of taking a moment and sensing inside and having access by simply sensing inside, having access to that experiential body information, whatever the right name might be, and in doing that also in a way training the client in that mode of being.

Greg: Yeah. I don't want to say training the client. I would be more inclined to say, because actually to be honest there's times the client does it for me. There's times that I might go into my head with some brilliant idea that I'm importing and there's something the client does that brings me back. There's something about being with another person that has this potential of an anchor, and it can happen either way. But I wouldn't want to say training the client. Let's see if I could say that in a way that I could stomach. I think I would be more inclined to say sharing with the client a sensitivity for that level of human existence that we typically do not pay attention to. Just sharing a moment of that. I had a conference just a couple of weeks ago, and I was presenting with some other people, and we were on kind of a panel, and one person spoke evocatively about working with refugees, and then going straight onto the next person who's going to speak about something equally exciting and evocative and important, and I butted in and I said just hold on a second, let's just pause a minute and really take in what this first person had said. And it felt very shocking to me in a conference with I don't know how many people there to have a moment of silence. And then it was shocking to me that that should be shocking. Why in conferences, and this is just one example of convention, it's like somebody is always talking. Why don't we say okay we've listened to this person, let's just take two minutes and see it settle into ourselves, see how this is resonating with us. I rarely go to conferences that have that kind of thing built in.

Serge: So that's where I'm going back to what I said a couple minutes ago. When I used the word training, which has its limitations. But when you said sharing, there is something missing in sharing, because I think what you bring in is an intentionality. The intentionality to notice those moments in yourself and to notice them in the client, so while maybe training is the wrong word because it's a bit mechanical, there is I think to me that sense of having learned the value of the pause, having learned the value of looking for, of making time, of priming the pump, of expecting, of being open to… you know, whatever the right words are, for some inner experience to come in. And appreciating its value, and of encouraging or sharing, and sharing can take the form of recognizing when the client does it. Something about that very, very strong value which is the antidote to conventional, meaning going on its way without a moment to think, without questioning the basic assumptions.

Greg: Yes, I agree with you, sometimes it is just sharing and it is as humble as that, and sometimes it's not, sometimes it's almost an insistence from my point of view based upon what I've learned from practicing as a Focusing person for decades. So you're right, sometimes it is more than sharing, but I wouldn't want to say training, because that, to me the way I would use that word, although it might be true… it might be an accurate word… I still don't want to use it because it sounds too much like there's a power relationship between me and the client, and it sounds like I'm… although it's true, I was going to say it sounds like I'm encouraging the client to break an old habit in order to form a new one. But that's true, at times I am encouraging that. I just don't like the word training.

Serge: Yeah. So for me training has a negative connotation of being like there is a right way to do it and a wrong way to do it, and it can be pretty mechanical, so I'm not hung up on one word, but I just wanted to highlight that maybe there is an ambiguity that on the one hand we want to not be representatives of a hierarchical model, and authority, but in some way we do embody authority and there is a part where transference and positive stuff comes from a certain amount of authority that we embody. Just not in a certain way, and it might be hard to define. So maybe you'd like to address a little bit the issue of authority?

Greg: Mhmm. It's a good point you're making. I don't agree with it, again I don't agree with it at the level of linguists, rather than…. I do agree with what you're pointing at. I would tend to typically work in a way that really deconstructs my authority, and I'm thinking I certainly have clients that would not see me as an authority, even if I might want them to. I might want them to just agree with what I'm saying, just agree with me and do it, but they don't. So I'm not sure about the authority. I'd say the authority comes from someplace else, and I might be kind of guiding something. I might have the authority enough to point. I think I can point at something, but what more typically happens… I don't in therapy teach my clients to focus usually, it's much more likely that I encourage them in my way of reflecting back, I encourage then to notice when something hits home and when something doesn't. In that way I think it's a much more natural process ,they realize oh, my body does that, my body can be a guide here in the session. And again I say my body, I don't know if that's the right way to say it, but certainly it's at that level where we're both being guided, so I think you want to use the word authority as the person that knows about that and can point towards that, and I have to agree with you if that's how you use the word, but I don't want to use the authority.

Serge: No, no. and so the word authority is so fraught, and it's a great example when you were using it to say if I want to tell a client what to do, and obviously that's a certain kind of authority, but there's a different kind of meaning when you talk about somebody who's walked the way of listening in a certain way, and of being open to that experience. And in a way speaks from experience, and so in that sense the word authority would be the authority of speaking from knowledge, of what's it's like to travel that road, and to share that experience.

Greg: Yeah, certainly, and I would say that as someone who has learned the value of not knowing I can claim to be a person who's learned the value of not knowing. Although I cannot claim that I always adhere to that. But I certainly do know the value of not knowing something, and slowing down, I know the value of that, so I can say that much to a client without question.

Serge: Yeah, so these are very powerful words. Someone who appreciates the value of not knowing and the value of slowing down, and staying with that.

Greg: That's right. And it's not not-knowing as a failure of knowing, it's not knowing as a much more precious thing than knowing. It's the value of not knowing, not that not knowing is just what we're left with when we don't know.

Serge: Yeah. So the deep appreciation for…

Greg: Exactly, and protecting it, protecting the not knowing.

Serge: Yeah. So, I wanna check if… obviously there's a lot more that you could say about all these things, but given the constraints of time, does it feel like a good place to end, or would you like to add something else?

Greg: Maybe if I could just review a few of the things that we touched on?

Serge: Yeah.

Greg: Things that are important to me are, not…. because I think some of these things are counter cultural in the current therapy world, and so one of those things is not getting hung up in the conceptual, or in technique, and when we have concepts, allowing them to migrate, allowing the concept to come into the current usage of it so that it can shift and change and become more than what it was just than a minute ago when we first attached it to whatever was happening. So it's the kind of deconstruction of concepts, and it's to have, as we were just saying this… sometimes a radical sense of not knowing what should happen in therapy, not even knowing what "therapy" is, not knowing what "life" is, and just kind of being quite open to that. I guess related to that, is not knowing… what is the status of the client and me in the therapy room? Are we two separate beings? In what sense are we separate and in what sense are we not separate? Because we're there as the environment of each other, and just keeping that as a question. And then the final thing from my point of view is this not individualizing distress, I think we do so much of that in psychotherapy, and I'm questioning that more and more. How much of what we see in psychotherapy is not actually… is almost masquerading as individual distress?

Serge: Thanks, Greg.

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