Serge Prengel: Creative integration of experience

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Serge Prengel, LMHC, is in private practice in New York. He is a graduate of France's Sorbonne University and HEC business school. He was trained in Focusing, Core Energetics and Somatic Experiencing. His work also draws from Systems-Centered theory. He is the editor *Proactive Mindfulness*.

The host in this conversation is Rae Johnson, PhD.

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

Courtney Lubell: We're now in conversation with Serge Prengel. And we're excited that he's here today in a conversation with Dr. Rae Johnson.

Rae Johnson: Serge, perhaps I'll begin just by acknowledging what a pleasure it is for me to be able to interview you. I've had the pleasure of having you interview me for Somatic Perspectives on a couple of occasions, and I am so happy that the tables are turned today. (laughter) And I'm hoping that the experience would be as pleasant for you as it has been for me. We've been in conversation before. Serge, I'm wondering if we could begin our conversation just by having you talk a little bit about some of your current projects and activities - the things you are involved with now and are exciting to you.

Serge Prengel: Thanks, Rae. So it's a pleasure for me also to reconnect with you in the form of a conversation, where as you say that the tables are turned. I'm in a private practice in New York City, and a lot of my excitement, enthusiasm, energy, is about exploring and trying new things to know that essentially every session is something new and there is a new exploration - things are suggested by clients' moments of getting stuck – are ways to open up new dimensions. So, discussion with colleagues, reading… In a general way, my experience of my work is something that is full of gate-opening into new directions, and it's very exciting. I also like collaborative things, like the somatic perspectives of psychotherapy series is about talking to people hearing their points of view and spreading that, but also in terms of writing or presentations of projects that I have. I am doing multiple collaborative things these days.

Rae: Great Serge, I'm wondering if I could ask you a little more specifically about both of those areas that you've just mentioned- both your private practice and how you continue to learn and build excitement and find innovation just in the day to day practice of clinical work, which is really exciting to me – the idea that we can work with clients on a weekly basis and still find something that feels new and alive. So I'd like to ask a little bit about that, and I would also like to ask about the work that you've been doing in the broader field of somatic psychology and the things that you are learning there. If I could come back to your clinical work and your private practice, I'm always interested in how practitioners come to the work that they are currently doing. I'm struck by the fact that the field of somatic psychology is so diverse in terms of modalities and perspectives, despite the fact that there's an underlying sort of shared philosophy or perspective in terms of starting with the body. Beyond that sort of set of foundational conceptual assumptions, the variety of work within the big

umbrella we call somatic psychology is quite remarkable. And you've trained in three different modalities that each has their own unique flavor and unique thing to offer in working with clients. Specifically, I'm talking about Focusing, which is the work of Gene Gendlin and others, which have quite a long tradition and a lot of application across a variety of other modalities – Core Energetics, and more recently, Somatic Experiencing. Could you say a little bit about how you work with each of those – whether you have found a way to integrate those modalities, whether you work with them separately – how do they show up in work that you do with clients?

Serge: Yes, yes, that's a wonderful question. And maybe to address it, I will first not go into the specifics but go into the word integrate, because I am obviously fascinated by integration – it's the whole point of the work I do – is paying attention to how different people view things. And I think integration is something that happens in a deep level inside a person. Integration is not where you take a little bit of something and combine it with something from another modality on the surface, but the image I would have is that it first goes into you, and you digest it and make it your own, and you understand it, and you integrate it into your vision of the world - and so your vision of the world is changed by that, and then there's something you spew out that's going to be your own mixture of these things.

Rae: It's a lovely embodied metaphor, Serge! The digestive process.

Serge: I like the digestive process a lot – in terms of integrating and making sense of things. So for instance, depending on the moment, it could be, that for instance, Focusing could be something that I don't necessarily refer to in a given session or think I am doing Focusing, but there is something in which I am very, very deeply influenced by Focusing as an attitude, as a way of being, as a way of resonating, as a way of finding a rhythm with the client, which is something that's much deeper than any Focusing procedure or technique. And so, you would say that I am in a Focusing-like resonance with the client.

Rae: Not that you're doing the six steps of Focusing.

Serge: Not at all, not at all – nor do I ever actually think about the six steps of Focusing. And there is something about, say the Somatic Experiencing part, which I really like a lot and find a lot of continuity with Focusing, not strangely in the sense that Peter Levine was influenced by Gene Gendlin and the felt sense part. And the two concepts of felt sense are very different in Focusing and in Somatic Experiencing – I think there is a complementarity of paying attention to the physical sensation – as in, called felt sense – more of the Focusing felt sense, having that rhythm, having the titration, ventilation of Somatic Experiencing. And so again, it's not that so much of a technique, but is a sensitivity to being in a rhythm with the client in a resonance where you are going to be paying attention to what is overwhelming, what is not, what is physical, what is happening at all levels of the person. Now for Core Energetics – there was a time when things like Bioenergetics and Core Energetics were mostly understood as cathartic, and the idea that you let it out, and you'd be free. I also think that it can be very soft, as John Pierrakos used to say, it is about energy and consciousness. The whole point was to see where the energy is and not necessarily loud, deep energy – but what is the energy? And connecting with the energy as a way to connect to the consciousness of it. So in that sense, my version of core Energetics field is to integrate it with the softer approaches. But in addition, there are times where the getting energy, the energizing you can do in Core Energetics is something that can be very nice as a way to stay out of it, to step out of the

box, to discover another dimension of self – not as a cathartic cure, but as a way of experiencing oneself in a different, more energized mode.

Rae: Right. What I'm hearing is that Core Energetics – that training has provided you with some tools for working with and moving energy, that simple attention and awareness provided by Focusing and Somatic Experiencing perhaps haven't explored, or developed or articulated fully as Core Energetics has done.

Serge: Yes, the Core Energetics do lean more in the energy area, and other methods are not so much in that area, and people, clients, and people in general are going to be in different phases and different moments of their lives – there are different issues, different things, so there is a value in having different vantage points from which to explore problems.

Rae: Right. So what I'm hearing is that the various trainings you have undertaken and the different modalities you use in your practice - in a way they give you a full pallet of colors with which to paint, that some give you a certain range and capacities and skills and compliment them by giving you other tools that you can use. And I like where you started which is, for you, it's important to be using those different perspectives in an integrated way by actually having tried them on in your own body and in your own experience, and integrate them on that level.

Serge: I integrated them as a consumer, if you want, as a client. I also integrated them in a different level, including an intellectual level - envision what it is like to be a human being, what it's like to change, or what it's like to struggle. And you use the metaphor of different colors or different tools, and it'll metaphorically be different access points. So each one is going to give you an access to a different side, a different perspective on what it's like to be a human being. And sometimes you don't know which one's going to be good. Sometimes it's actually good to start and see where it leads you, because part of the conclusion may be that avenue may not be the productive one, and then it gives you an idea of where else to go.

Rae: But if you find that particular perspective or particular access point that doesn't allow you to go very far, you've got another route to go to, you've got an alternate access point provided by that other modality that you're on.

Serge: And I'm noticing as you speak, my Focusing part that resonates and says is it right, is it not right, is something that I'm putting my finger on, and it's not just me in a way, because part of how I like to work is that it's a joint project, a creative process that involves both me and the client. In a way, it's not just that I'm doing something that works or not, but as a team, it's working for us or not.

Rae: You're actually engaging with the client in a really collaborative way - a feedback loop going between the two of you, so that as you're going, you're suggesting different things, or noticing different things, or making different observations, the two of you are actually deciding together where you're going and what's next.

Serge: It's not obviously something that only I do, a lot and lot and lot of people do that. I think that people who do just talk therapy do that, but the beauty of it in something that involves the body is that it's going to be more experiential, so the sense of creativity that goes in it is actually going to be

more involving, and there is more of a satisfaction, to be on a team that explores and works this way.

Rae: There you are, in the moment together. And neither of you really know what's going to happen next. And that's actually a good thing.

Serge: Yes, it's a wonderful thing. It's not totally true, because there is a part where actually there is a part of me that is in some way, is trying to play ahead, maybe just a few seconds of what's happening. There's a little observing part that is tracking, that is sometimes making hypotheses, so it can be a bit nagging at some moments where I am totally involved in the connection, in the process, but usually, it's also kind of an awareness, a mindfulness of what's happening, that is not just resonance with what is happening inside and what is happening with the client, but is also paying attention to some hypothesis and some intuition, and testing it.

Rae: So even without that conceptual framework in something on the body level, that framework is still there?

Serge: Yes. Because it's very hard for us people to totally divorce from expectations and thoughts, by default, the human mind goes to patterns, goes to finding patterns, goes to simplifying, goes to having ideas. So I find that it's useful to be actually aware of it and use it instead of pretending that it's not there.

Rae: (laughter) Yes, exactly. Thanks Serge, that's very helpful, and thanks for being willing to go into some depth in terms of how your clinical work, how you see it, how you work with the different modalities that you're trained in. I'm wondering if then you could also speak a little bit about your own individual professional path. How did you find out where you are now, working the way that you are working, and if there's something about somatic psychology or the modalities that you've trained in, that drew you and compelled you. I'm wondering if you can share a bit of your own sort of professional path from where you would like to begin to where you are now.

Serge: Well, I, to start with the path, if you want, something for various reasons when I was as student, I did not think studying psychology and I went through to business, and in business, in which a way I felt that I had to, but it didn't really go through, I didn't want to do business, so I went essentially - I went to do advertising, which was more creative. And for big parts of my adult life, I was in advertising and I had a small advertising agency. A little over 20 years ago, I shifted and I went into creating goods, exploration - creating goods, and then studying therapy, and going into myself becoming a therapist. I had been more interested originally in the aspect of therapy that had to do with insight and creativity. I was always very interested in the idea of how the Zen koan can suddenly get people to see the world in a different way. So both, if you want to know, the archetype that went in my mind, is that it is something that we kind of contemplate, and suddenly you have this amazing revelation, the world changes, bells and whistles and sunsets and all kinds of things – the world changes. But when actually I did through purely coincidence and friends, I discovered Focusing, and I discovered Core Energetics, and both were things that I was curious about and had a very nice way of giving a different framework to the notion of creativity.

Rae: I was just saying, I was hearing creativity as that common thread that drew you along your path.

Serge: Yes, yes. Creativity is a big thing for me so, both for me as a person, but also for my sense of, what it's like, drawing on creativity is a very nice way to create resources in people, so that you know, from the model of resourcing that many trauma therapists have, you just get involved in it, you pull from your strength, it's something that engages your sense of playfulness, engages problem-solving, it's a way which people can, instead of being disempowered by situation that they're malfunctioning, maybe there's something defective and seeing an authority in fixing them, by being in a creative mode, they're going to be more into a sense of losing the power they already have, and also the quality of resonance, transference to transference, is something that I personally like, so it's not necessary that it works better as an absolute statement, but is something that I personally enjoy and makes my day pleasant and also in a way when I work with people who enjoy that - we all benefit from it.

Rae: Right. I'm really hearing your perspective as not coming from a model of illness or pathology in terms of psychotherapy, but really from a model of building resilience and enhancing creativity and developing capacities for relationships.

Serge: Yes. And it feels very good to see that actually a lot of the underpinnings of the contemporary psychotherapists going that way, in terms of neuroscience, in terms of attachment theory, and so in terms of the neurobiology of attachment, there's a whole thing that seems to be convergent toward the idea of involving people at that level.

Rae: Yes, yes. Positive psychology - the things that are being learned in that perspective. I agree, I think it is very heartening, to both us coming from this perspective for a number of years, to find that more mainstream clinical psychology is catching up with us. (laughter) I'm wondering, Serge, if you could talk a little about somatic perspective, on the work that you've been doing there simply because I understand that it's such a service to the somatic psychology community - the work that you have done in that area over the years and hopefully the work that you plan to continue to do – could you say a little about it?

Serge: On a practical level, a way to describe it is – it's a series of interviews where there's a practitioner, who is interviewed by me, about what they do, and the approach I take is a conversational approach where it's not something that's about explaining the theoretical underpinnings – we can talk about it, but mostly what we try to do is get a vivid sense of seeing the world through the eyes of this person. And part of it is because, in a way when you read a book or academic paper, you can understand a lot of things – but what is missing is that lived dimension – the casualness of "I see it that way" and it's almost not the same situation but it parallels for me is how we learn through mirror neurons and how procedural memory works – is that we capture something at some kind of global felt sense level and relate to it. So if it's too foreign to us, we simply don't – I mean it's impossible, if we hear somebody speak Chinese and we don't, it'll simply remain impenetrable to you, but if something is close enough for you to feel the experience, just far enough that there is something challenging, and close enough that you have access to it then you have the possibility of accessing it at that felt sense level. And then you can feel in some sort of way that you absorb that experience instead of absorbing some abstract knowledge.

Rae: Right, I'm struck by the way you're talking about your visions for those conversations in Somatic Perspectives, simply because it strikes me as very much in line with your description of your clinical work in terms of using different modalities to provide with different access points. And what I'm hearing is that, interviewing someone in the field of psychology, who perhaps have developed a

particular modality or theoretical framework, interviewing from the perspective of who they are as a person, what their experience has been, and how they see the world and their work give your listeners an opportunity to access their work in a different way.

Serge: Yes, it's one of the things I had knew Gendlin's work through books and through teaching by other people than him. One day I had the chance to hear him in person, long time ago, for the first time, and I was struck by actually picking out as he was talking – emotions that I could relate to, and it was a very interesting thing to say, the stuff he developed I could relate to and that makes so much sense. There's actually a dimension that is not expressed in that way of transmitting communication that goes through books and goes through other people, is that emotion that I can share, that I can relate to, is actually, another dimension to why I'm drawn to this work.

Rae: Right, it was having an experience of how Focusing lived in Gene Gendlin. Yes, wonderful. One thing we haven't talked about is, how your work relates, and how you understand the whole idea of the topic of this teleseminar, which is the Mystery of Embodiment. What does that phrase mean to you, how might you, if you do, work with that in your clinical practice or in your broader community work?

Serge: It's a great question – I'm glad you asked this – I loved the title the Mystery of Embodiment – and I love it for its poetic quality. There is a part of me that if I tried to take it literally, I have actually some resistance to it, and if I take it literally, it seems to imply that there's a soul in some place and its incarnation embodiment, and so it confers to the mystery - implies a whole approach prejudging that there's a soul first, then there's a body consequentially. And my approach, my vision of the world is more of a sense of matter, body, giving birth with the brain being part of it, the mind being a phenomenon of the brain, so something that is basically a whole process, but certainly not the body being some kind of creation of the mind. However, at a poetic level, I absolutely love it because the idea of entering into the mystery and so easily as we can think about ourselves as creators of the mind, and we are in fact disconnected from all the richness of paying attention to the body experience, and treating it as a mystery, and almost, not just a mystery like reading a mystery, but something sacred like in the Middle Ages, they had mysteries which were placed to understand the functioning of the world. I think it's a wonderful invitation and speaks to how much I love to think of this work in a creative way, and in a way that goes beyond the literal.

*Courtney: And that's wonderful. We do actually have questions from listeners and thanks for your patience, and I want to remind participants that you can ask questions live, and if you're calling in on the telephone you can press *2, and if you're listening to the webcast you can type in your question, and so we'll take as many questions as we can in the time we have. I have a question from Cindy in Vancouver, Canada, her question is: I so appreciated you bringing in the metaphor of the digestion as you spoke about the body – it seems like the body is our digestive system for experience, and that when we are struggling to metabolize an experience, we are struggling in our body. Does this make sense and what are your thoughts about this?*

Serge: Yes, it makes a lot of sense. I mean first of all, just continuing the metaphor of metabolizing, so thought is not something that happens in thin air, or just divorced from the body, there are processes going on in the body. The body is breathing, the blood is flowing, and you notice when you have some pleasant thoughts your body relaxes, you notice when you have some thoughts that are difficult or threatening, your body tenses up, your breathing changes. So you know, there is a

whole body processing that takes place as we actually metabolize our mental process. Rae, what do you think?

Rae: I think there's something about the metaphor of digestion in terms of the body processing experience that really underscores our capacity to be nurtured and nourished by experience as well as the risk of having to experience the upsetting, or not nurturing, or not good for us, and there is a way in which our bodies do that all the time, and at the same time, adding a level of conscious integration and awareness – how our bodies process experience, I think as an element of integration that really enhances our capacity to be more choiceful, more intentional, more selective about what we take in and what we don't take in and how we take it in. Serge, I'm reminded of the work of Peter Levine and some Somatic Experiencing, in that respect that there's an understanding around how we respond to things, how we metabolize experience including traumatic experience – is very much about the body.

Serge: I like what you did is also introduce to us the elements – the element of consciousness, the element of act development it's not just a passive process.

Rae: Right, and I'm adding mindful awareness of that process, paying attention to the process. I think in a way, the idea is not just letting the body do what the body does, but how can we facilitate the connection between body and mind, automatic processes, the nervous system, with our capacities for intentional awareness, and how does that enhance that process.

Serge: That's when work becomes really fascinating.

Courtney: That's wonderful. We have a question from Steve from Rapid City, and his question is: what do you recommend when working with a client who has a lot of anger, in terms of bringing in the body, and working with intense emotions, like anger, can be?

Serge: I like to work with people who have anger. You know but my sense of it is I try to not deal with anger as something that has to be treated but to see anger as a sign of something that originates from something else. And to first and foremost, get some kind of understanding from the client, that you know, that some way there is a system, a larger system, whether it is a system in the current situation the client is in for example a family situation or a work situation or a situation that started in childhood, where the client is in some way put in a role in the system where they were stuck in expressing things through anger. I also like to put it within a context of anger being a form of activation and that there is a sense of threat that is perceived, where at some moment, the threat feels so strong that they have no impulse control. So in other words I like to put in a lot of a sense that the client is not some kind of monster who is acting in destructive and self-destructive ways. Because more often then not when people come for anger, come either it's been pounding on them they're really bad people, they're hurting all kinds of people, or they themselves feel really guilty about it, or feel aggrieved, but in a way that the intensity of it is unmanageable, and the idea is to enlist their cooperation, in going from something that is unmanageable, to something that's going to be manageable in a way that's going to work for them, and not hurt others, but also benefit them. I spend a lot of time on that because to me, this part is going to make what you do with anger that much more effective because if it's seen within a framework where figuring out what the trigger is, slowing down, paying attention to the body sensation of the moment of trigger, and slowing down and finding how it relates to what is really triggering that, what is beyond the stimulus and what is the deeper part that it's triggered. All of this is going to make more sense if the is feeling in a place

where it's working for them as opposed to their being treated for something that's really bad in them.

Courtney: That's beautiful, a question from, I think we have time for maybe one more question before closing comments, from Peter in Dublin, Ireland, Peter asks: what do you see is the role in community in supporting or not a return to the body?

Serge: I think it's a very moving question, because it's impossible to do something lasting without community. And I think both in the level of an individual client and in terms of changing the world, our work is, somatic therapists, our work as psychotherapists is to help individual clients but also to change the way the world perceives what human beings are and what they do. So if you take an alcoholic and put them back in a bar, where all their friends are drinking, it's going to be very hard for them to stay sober. The whole question of paying attention to the body and living with the body is going to be that much more effective to be extended to people living in an environment that is a norm.

Courtney: Thank you Serge. I am going to turn it over back to you and Rae for closing comments.

Rae: Serge, would you like to start by just adding anything that you haven't had a chance to speak to yet that you'd like to say?

Serge: Okay. So I do - a lot of my work is oriented around something that is, in a broad sense, called mindfulness. And I call it – instead of calling mindfulness, I had a – when I call it mindfulness, too many people think of it that I'm teaching meditation, which is not at all what I do. So I've come to call it the proactive mind, and that's why I've come to call my practice Proactive Change. In the sense of the – using the trauma, the whole model of autonomic nervous system and sympathetic activation becomes a reactive one, which is very useful to survive. But then we also have the capacity as human beings to add another dimension to it to go further than just kneejerk reaction. And that's the capacity of mindfulness or the proactive mind, is the capacity to learn from experience, to see, to have a broader perspective, to reorient, to control, in the service of growth. That's the part where also it is something that is not just about therapy but is also about personal growth, about human potential, and that's what is the most exciting for me.

Rae: And so, that's your growing edge, is how to enlist proactivity, that is, how we're understanding the work that we are doing and the changes we are helping to facilitate in others.

Serge: Yes.

Rae: I guess, just in terms of my closing comments, I want to express my appreciation to you, Serge, for being so wonderfully articulate about the work that you're doing – so clear about the perspectives and principles and the theoretical framework that you draw on in order to do your work, and maybe just in closing, I'd like to speak to the question from the listener in Dublin about community. I think that communities need attention, they need cultivation, they don't happen by themselves. And part of what I value so much about Serge and his work has to do with that community aspect. And that he's investing and bringing to a collective audience, some understandings about the work that we do in somatic psychology that are really valuable. So, thank you Serge.

Serge: Thanks Rae.

This conversation was transcribed by Larissa Lai.

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